
A Dangerous Game of Lust
Lucy Langton

A Dangerous Game of Lust

A REGENCY ROMANCE NOVEL

LUCY LANGTON

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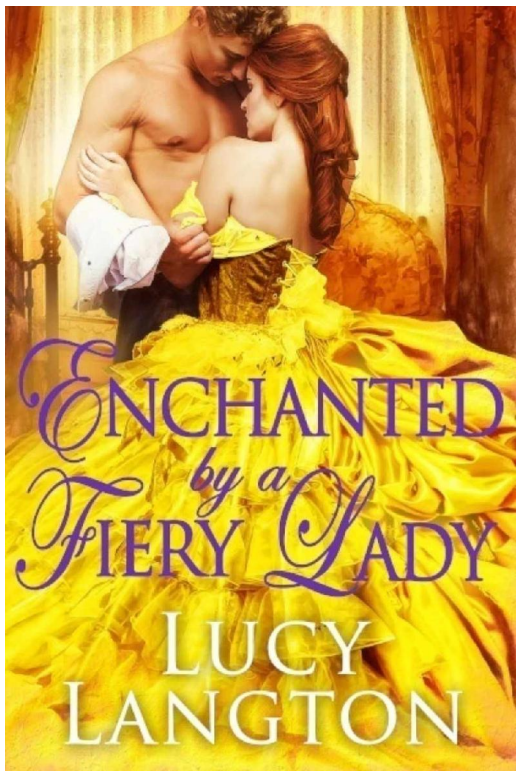
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A Dangerous Game of Lust

Introduction

As the daughter of a law breaking group's chief, the daring Marie Devon has learned the hard way of life. Even though robberies and chase had been her second nature, something had always felt wrong… When her people kidnap the dissolute son of a Duke, Marie's whole world turns upside down. While her burning desire for their prisoner begins to relentlessly grow everyday, will she be able to carry through this last crime, or will she risk it all for a chance at a forbidden romance?

Repelled by the corruption of London's high society, Marquess Benedict Carlton has chosen to live like a rake, spending his days drinking and gambling. Little did he know that his world would soon change forever, when a group of thieves capture him as a hostage. What he never expected though, was to fall in love with his lustful captivator, the fiery daughter of the band's chief, Marie. Will Benedict manage to strike a bargain with the gang in order to gain more time with his enticing captor?

Marie and Benedict both know that this world is not made for an outlaw and a nobleman to dream of a common future together, without condemning their loved ones to scandal and deprivation. Will they defy society's constraining rules and fight for their unconditional love? Will they manage to forget their sinful past and surrender to

their passionate desire?

Chapter 1

Descent

Benedict wore a mask of confidence as he stepped across the threshold into the great Dunchester ballroom. *And why shouldn't I be confident?* he asked himself, trying to steady his thundering heartbeat.

Indeed, the only son of the Duke of Preston and bearing the title of Marquess of Elebury in his own right, Benedict Carlton had all the qualities one could expect in a young man of London society. Though only being twenty years of age, barely out of his boyhood, Benedict had already forged a reputation for himself in the *ton* for intelligence, sobriety, and all-around good character.

Apart from his sterling personality and behaviour, Benedict's appearance also had never failed to draw admiring attention from eligible young ladies. His sandy blonde hair, piercing blue eyes, and strong figure of a natural athlete were much remarked upon.

Yet for as much as he had in his favour, beneath his mask of poise, Benedict felt himself coming to pieces. All the positive traits in the world would not protect him from what awaited him in this place, he knew.

A glittering smile came to Benedict's lips as a welcome diversion from his fate presented itself in the shape of Lady Emilia Crane. It had been some months since he had made the charming young lady's acquaintance, and he recalled that their banter had been as entertaining as it was flirtatious.

Seeing Lady Emilia passing his way as she exited the ballroom at the side of another woman, Benedict leapt on this opportunity to put off what was yet to come.

"My dear Lady Emilia," he said, bowing grandly. "What a pleasure to run into you. I am most happy to see that the *ton* has grown no less pretty in my absence, even if the fashions have blossomed into ever more obscenely grand permutations."

He reached out a hand to take hers and kiss it in a stately manoeuvre, but as he did so, the two ladies walked right past him in a flurry of whispers and muffled laughter. Benedict blinked in confusion—had his legendary charm grown dull and ineffectual in his absence from society? Or was it that his family's reputation had suffered even worse than he had imagined?

Perhaps the ton has simply grown more rude, he thought grimly. *Or more hard of hearing.*

He swallowed, his tongue feeling like ashes in his mouth, and made himself continue into the ballroom even as he wished he could be anywhere else in the world.

"The Most Honourable, Marquess of Elebury!" cried the footman at Benedict's side. He fought the impulse to jump at the volume of the man's announcement, and he felt a trickle of sweat that threatened to turn into a torrent as all eyes in the room turned in his direction.

Benedict swallowed again, lifting his chin and forcing his unruffled expression all the harder. *Come on, lad,* he told himself with

determination. *Father is counting on you. These people are your friends—or were once, at least. Don't let a few odd looks chase you away from the task at hand. After all, who's going to claw the family back to respectability if not you? Go greet your host, drink some wine, have a dance…enjoy yourself, for God's sake! It's just a ball, not the bloody Spanish Inquisition!*

But he could not dismiss the outrageous reception he was greeted with as easily as that. As he walked into the great, high-ceilinged room beneath extravagant crystal chandeliers, from all sides, he heard the stirrings of a symphony of gossip, the hushed laughter and twittering of the predatory gentry that spied fresh meat.

"—told you, Dunlop. That's him, poor devil!"

"I simply cannot believe Her Grace would do such a thing to her family! But then, she was always a weak sort, God rest her—"

"—say such corruption carries through the family, you know. I can't even believe Dunchester invited such a pathetic figure to this ball. I know I certainly wouldn't bring such scandal into our house!"

"—expect it shall not be long before his father goes the same as the mother, the way I hear he drinks these days. Terrible thing to happen to such an esteemed—"

Each word that was spoken about him struck Benedict like a knife in the back. His pace slowed, his posture stiffened as he fought like a demon not to turn on these wicked whisperers and let loose his rage in their direction. It was all he could do to mechanically force one foot in front of the other, gritting his teeth and repeating to himself, *Father is counting on you. The family needs you.*

But when Benedict had at last crossed the polished marble floor to the cluster of hangers-on who surrounded the host of this affair, the rosy-cheeked Duke of Dunchester, the hush that fell over the gaggle of lords and ladies as he approached was entirely too much for him.

These were friendly faces, once. In the crowd on the peripheries of Dunchester, Benedict recognised a dozen esteemed gentlemen and vibrant young ladies whom he had danced with at balls in the past. Now, though, they had been changed into strangers by his absence from society for the previous months.

Worse than strangers, really; the knowing smiles and the laughter that sparkled in their eyes bespoke a cruel awareness of the heights to which Benedict had once been raised and the pitiful low to which he had now descended.

Hang Father, he thought. *Hang the bloody family. I won't be made the fool just because Mother had an illicit liaison with some damnable Frenchman. If anyone's going to suffer these indignities in a vain attempt to salvage the unsalvageable, it won't be me.*

With a burst of vigour, Benedict wheeled and turned back toward the doorway, his coach, and anywhere that was far away from here.

"Are you leaving already, Lord Elebury?"

Benedict stopped in place and closed his eyes as Dunchester's booming baritone echoed after him, casting a hush over the rest of the ball. A hundred different impulses warred within Benedict…but the war was

not a long one. For the first time in his life, he found his better angels had flown off and taken his good judgement with them, leaving him only his wit and his bitterness.

"I'm afraid I am, Your Grace," Benedict found himself saying in a voice loud enough to be heard by the most distant members of this accursed audience.

"A pity, that," said Dunchester with a droll smile and a wink toward one of his equally bilious companions. "We have seen so little of you of late. Or your family. I had extended an invitation in hopes of offering you my condolences on the loss of your mother."

With a sarcastic grin on his lips, Benedict met Dunchester's gaze straight on. "I thank you, Your Grace. But from what I have seen, my presence is not required for such courtesies. You and the rest of the Empire can jolly well carry on talking about my family without me."

Whispers broke out from all corners. Dunchester harrumphed, his white moustache quivering in indignation and confusion.

Before he could speak in reply, though, Benedict bowed deeply and continued, "And as it seems that you lot believe that I no longer belong in polite society, I shall do us all a favour and find some low, filthy pit by the side of the road to crawl into. More fitting for one such as I, surely, even if it does deprive a pack of jackals of their fresh meat. By your leave, Your Grace."

The outcry that surrounded Benedict was even more incensed than before…but now it was different. Benedict felt a rush of pride rather than suspicion; he had made this happen, and somehow that made him feel powerful. Indeed, as he carried himself out the door of the

now-scandalized ballroom, Benedict faintly walked on air, his steps light as he was propelled out of there by a dark sort of joy.

"Hang the lot of them," he hummed as he skipped to his carriage and out of civilized society, hopefully forever.

* * *

"Father?" Benedict called into the cavernous study of the Duke of Preston. "Are you in here?"

*It really does grow more and more like a tomb every day…*he mused. Though large and well-appointed enough to befit a duke, over the last several months, his father had turned the study into more of a crypt than a place of business and correspondence. The windows were never opened anymore, the shades rarely drawn, and the Duke seemed almost eager to entomb himself in its dark recesses.

Beginning with embalming himself, of course, thought Benedict when he heard the clink of glass in reply to his call.

"What's that? Benedict, is that you?" echoed from the elegant chair where the Duke had recently been given to sleeping…or falling unconscious at various points during the day, at least. This outcry was followed by the sound of sloshing liquid, then muttered curses.

Benedict sighed. *Why did I even bother to come speak with him?* The Duke had been sliding into a sorry state of despair for some time now, but it had grown even more dramatic when his wife's infidelity had been discovered, and still more so when she took ill. Now that it had

been nearly three months since she had passed away, Benedict had given up any hope of his father crawling his way out of his sepulchre on his own.

"Here now, step over this way, lad, into the…why's it so bloody dark in here? Get that layabout butler of ours to light the lamps in here, won't you? About time someone around here does his job, don't you think?"

Wordlessly Benedict lit a taper from the embers in the fireplace and lit a lamp on the table beside his father. The warm orange light revealed a room in poor condition and a man who looked still worse. From the empty and half-empty bottles on the floor and the woolly look in the Duke's eyes, Benedict could see his father was deep in his cups though it was barely past sundown.

"Good-for-nothing Weaver," grumbled the Duke as he clumsily tried to shift his weight into sitting upright. Anger burned in his eyes, though as usual these days, it was unfocused, radiating from him in search of a target. "For God's sake, what's the point in employing servants if they're never about to do what you ask? *Weaver, where are you?*" he bellowed, spittle flying from his lips.

"You dismissed Weaver some time ago, Father," said Benedict softly, taking a seat opposite the Duke. "Mister Hollings has been performing his duties admirably, though."

The Duke's gaze fell hard onto Benedict, clamping eagerly onto this nearer target for his ire. "I know that, damn you, don't you correct me like I'm some simpleton!"

"No, Father," sighed Benedict. He cast his eyes down to the beautiful

old carpet beneath their feet, now dappled with wine stains old and new.

"Look at me when I'm speaking to you!" The Duke was now leaning forward with renewed energy, his glass of wine forgotten.

"Yes, Father." Benedict's fingers clenched into fists as his eyes roamed over his father's familiar features. His dark hair, mud-coloured eyes and weak chin—not for the first time, Benedict was glad he took after his mother instead. At least he was not cursed to resemble such a cruel man as what his father had become.

If the Duke detected the hatred contained in his progeny's gaze, he gave no sign of it. After warily meeting his son's stare for a few moments, the older man nodded curtly and grumbled, "And stop muttering. Can barely hear a bloody word you're saying."

Then a pall of silence fell onto the father and son. Unable to look at his father any longer without losing his temper, Benedict allowed himself to idly look around the shadowy study in hopes of distracting himself.

So many of the ornaments and items of furniture in the room once carried treasured memories—the Oriental folding fan his father had brought home from his travels, the painting of his mother's great-grandfather in antique plate mail, the little wooden statue of a dog Benedict had bought for himself at the market when he was just a boy.

Benedict scowled, his mouth twisting in a grimace. Now all that was soured by thoughts of his mother's scandal and his father's descent into drunkenness. Even these once comforting sights left him feeling empty and resentful of the happiness that had been stolen from his

family.

The Duke loosed a colossal yawn, then leaned forward in his seat and squinted at the clock hung over the mantelpiece. After blinking and considering what he was seeing, he sat straighter and pointed an accusing finger in the direction of Benedict.

Now the storm truly breaks.

“Here, now!” snapped the Duke as Benedict looked on, mouth pressed into a tight line. “It’s not yet eight o’clock! You’ve barely left for Dunchester’s ball. What are you doing back here so early?”

“There was hardly any point in my going at all, Father. It was just as I told you it would be—there’s no forgiveness for the likes of us, no sympathy. All anyone could see was someone to make sport of, someone whose lustful mother brought shame upon—”

“What’s that!” roared the Duke as he stumbled to his feet and trudged close enough to Benedict that he could feel his withering breath on his face. “My only son, confronted with a few whispers by his peers, and he scuttles off in fear? Too weak-willed to do your duties to your family, eh? Or too ashamed of your grieving father to do as you’re told?”

“Father, I wasn’t afraid,” Benedict protested, still keeping his seat in the shadow of his father. “But to hear them say those things, to see the way they looked at me…it was more than anyone should have to bear, Father. You know how hard it has been for all of us these last months. It’s too soon, I tell you. The *ton* will forget someday when they have found some other sport, but they have not yet—”

Benedict may as well have been speaking to a wall. His father clutched his hair between his fingers and gave a low moan, drowning out his son's words as he looked off into the distance. "The shame, oh, the shame of having a disloyal son! Oh, I only thank God your poor mother died before she could see her child let his family fall into ruin before standing up to his own cowardice!"

"*Me*?" Benedict was on his feet in a flash, his face mere inches away from his father's sneering visage. "As if she would survive another day if she saw her husband behaving like a pathetic sot!"

The Duke's face flushed redder still. His mouth gaped stupidly for a moment before he wagged his finger in Benedict's face and shouted, "You dare speak to your father like that?"

"Why not?" Benedict replied, matching the Duke's aggressive posture. The floodgates were open now, and there was no staying the deluge. "Perhaps someone should have been speaking sense to you sooner. It would have helped things keep from getting so bad in the first place if her husband had paid attention to something besides his own damn entertainment for a change. Maybe it would have even kept her from running off and finding a man who—"

Benedict was stopped mid-sentence by his father's hand lashing out and slapping him hard across the face. He gasped at the pain and looked with fury at the Duke, whose eyes were red and wild.

"I won't hear another word from you! Not on that subject, not ever," snarled the Duke as he swung out his arm in another vicious backhand. Benedict dodged the second blow with little difficulty, but he felt his blood boil as though his father's fist had connected this time. He reeled, staggering backwards as his father advanced on him.

“You pathetic disappointment of a son,” the Duke growled, his demeanour growing ever more threatening. “As if a faithless wife weren’t enough for one man to take, now I must put up with a devilish child as well….”

A strange look passed across the Duke’s face. For an instant, Benedict could only recoil, thinking he was about to unleash a savage beating on him. But then the Duke collapsed to the floor instead, a foul belch issuing from his lips. Benedict straightened, looking down on him with as much pity as disgust.

“Begone from my sight,” said the Duke from his half-prone position. “I am sick at the sight of you. You look too much like—like that hateful witch of a wife. If I see you darken my sight again, I…I will tear you limb from limb. I sw-swear I will.”

But by then, he was speaking only to himself and to the carpet that pressed against his face. His wish had been granted—Benedict was gone.

* * *

It was not always like this. He was a great man, once, Benedict thought darkly. *At least, I always thought so.*

Indeed, apart from his propensity for occupying his time at balls rather than tending to the affairs of his noble domain, the Duke of Preston had always been held up as a model of upstanding character and good behaviour. Many were the times Benedict had counted

himself fortunate for having a father who was caring and not unkind, unlike so many of his peers.

That's all gone, now. Vanished as though it were just a dream. Gone to wherever Mother has been taken, I expect. It struck Benedict like a blow about the head that he was all but an orphan now.

Worse, really, as a child whose parents have died could usually be sure of their eternal reward in the hereafter…or at least inherit whatever they had left behind. Instead, he felt he must be a meaner creature altogether, with a wanton mother and a father who had grown cruel and tyrannical.

Benedict sneered at the London streets that rolled by the carriage window. The neighbourhood was familiar to him—too familiar, he knew. And though he was still too beset by hurt and rage to be able to assemble a coherent idea of what he was to do with himself now, he was certain of the fact that he had to be as far as possible from his home and any other person or place that might know him.

Where does a man go when he cannot return home? Benedict asked himself, fingers stroking the gentle cleft in his chin. *Surely there must be somewhere the common people go to forget their problems…but where?*

"Ho there, driver!" Benedict called out the window in a fit of inspiration.

A moment passed, then two. Benedict repeated his call louder, then the voice of the man atop the carriage replied, "Who, me, my lord?"

“Aye!” Benedict shouted. Recognising the voice of his house’s stalwart old driver, he called again by name. “Lionel, do you know anywhere a man can get a drink? A public house, perhaps?”

The steady tattoo of horseshoes on cobblestones filled the air. After a time, Lionel shouted down to him in an uncertain voice, “There’s the St. George Club in Surrey, my lord. Your father has often been there on business, and—”

Benedict winced. “No, nothing like that. Not anywhere around here, in fact. Don’t you know somewhere where I won’t have to worry about being recognised?”

Another long minute passed before the driver answered in a halting voice, “I…might know somewhere, my lord. A public club of sorts. Merrick’s, it’s called. But it’s hardly the kind of place the son of a duke would be safe or comfortable, and tends to attract entirely the wrong sort of—”

“That sounds ideal! To Merrick’s, Lionel. With all haste!” Benedict smiled as the reins cracked and the carriage lurched forward, carrying away from all he had known and hopefully to something far better.

The rest of the carriage ride was like a blissful dream. Benedict saw familiar landmarks recede into nothing, replaced with increasingly ugly old buildings and uglier people. Eventually, the carriage ground to a stop and deposited him in front of a wide, squat building with a faded wooden sign.

Over Lionel’s ongoing protestations, Benedict skipped through the door, tossing a groat to the vicious-looking bald man standing by the entrance. Benedict felt charged with excitement at the break in his

routine and giddy with the abandonment of his cares and obligations. He could not remember the last time he had felt so energetic.

The man behind the bar was as large as he was ugly and did not stop wiping down a spot on the old wooden bar even as he examined Benedict carefully with his single remaining eye. *One wonders how the rest of the bar manages to stay so colourfully dirty if the man is so dedicated to cleaning…*

"An ale, barman. Or a wine, perhaps. Anything you have that's stronger than milk will suffice," Benedict chirped as he sat at the bar.

The barman's expression grew sourer still. He looked Benedict up and down once more, still unmoving from his place a few paces away, then silenced a chorus of giggles from a drunkard at the end of the bar. "Think you might've gotten some bad directions, my lord," he growled. "The opera's a few miles down the—"

Benedict silenced the man by slapping a guinea on the bar and sliding it in the bartender's direction. The man's good eye widened at the sight, then took in Benedict warily. "That's for never calling me 'my lord' again," Benedict said with a smirk. "And there will be more where that came from as long as no one here calls me anything but 'Benedict.' Or 'sir,' if you must."

The one-eyed bartender slyly picked up the coin, and after bouncing it up and down in his hand, it vanished into a pocket. "Well, in that case…" said the barman with a wicked grin, then he proceeded to pull an ale from a nearby keg. "But I'll have you know this is a respectable place, *sir*. Whatever it is you're lookin' to spend your time on, no rough business of any sort round here—strictly high-class custom."

Benedict looked about him with wonderment. “Shabby” hardly did the room justice. The floor was stained a motley of reds and browns and riddled with holes besides. What glasses he could spy from his seat at the bar were chipped and filled with liquid of questionable valour, and the motley assortment of cutthroats and half-soused harlots were as mean and nasty as any characters he had read about in novels.

Benedict smiled. It was absolutely perfect.

“I can see that. Well, then, pour me an ale and open an account for me, barman,” said Benedict with a roguish grin spreading deliciously across his face.

He cast a quick glance towards the heavens, then brought it back down to his own comfortable purgatory with satisfaction. “I suspect I shall be spending a great deal of time here.

Chapter 2

The Price of Friendship

Benedict grimaced as he surveyed the bloody scene in front of him, a freshly filled wine glass in his hand.

I can hardly believe such a thing is possible, but these public balls seem to be even more deathly dull than the ton's society affairs. Indeed, apart from some uncharacteristic activity coming from a group of shabby drunks who had somehow made their way to this event, socialising was just as repellent to Benedict as it had been since his misadventure at Dunchester all those long Seasons ago.

*Though there was that enticing-looking woman with the head of black curls…*Benedict recalled with idle curiosity.

He looked idly around the room from his position against the wall but caught no sight of her among the dancers. *A shame,* he thought. *Something about her was most intriguing—it's been so long since any London woman has held my attention for more than a few moments.* Not that that kept him from carousing like there was no tomorrow.

Benedict sipped his wine and smacked his lips at the taste of the stuff. *It really is remarkable how quickly one becomes used to different circumstances*, he reflected as he took another sip. *Father would not deign to allow this swill to be used as dishwater, yet compared to the bilge I have been drinking at that awful Merrick's, this may as well be the nectar of the gods.*

As he drained the last dregs of his wine with gusto, out of the corner of his eye, Benedict caught sight of a pair of skinny women in stiff blue gowns staring at him. His first instinct, as ever, was to approach them and engage in a spat of flirtatious banter…but an unwelcome, judgmental air hung over the women. He resisted the urge to turn to look at them, but as he heard faint, stifled titters exchanged between them, he could not help but turn to glare in their direction.

Wonderful, he thought as he choked on his own bitter sarcasm. *I have been back in polite society—or something passingly close, at least—for less than an hour and already I am the subject of idle whisperings.*

"Is there something on my face?" Benedict growled at the onlookers. The women scattered like birds, chirping variously with indignation and hilarity at the interaction.

Benedict grunted in frustration and proceeded toward the table with the refreshments—more importantly, with the wine. *A man can't even be left in peace to drink his fill*, he thought with a glum shake of his head. *I knew I should have stayed in my happy little gutter. The ton will never forget…not after my last performance at Dunchester.* He found himself shouldering past other revellers on the way, hearing further whispers or obsequious greetings. He ignored them both the same.

Taking up a vaguely promising bottle from the table, Benedict raised it to refill his glass when he caught sight of a haggard-looking older man on the other side of the refreshments. Benedict had always thought he had a real talent for reading people, and the story told by the face of this man was a sad one, beyond a doubt. He looked to be not as old as Benedict had first suspected, and his posture was as straight as his limbs which were both lithe and strong…but the lines on his face and whispers of red around his aristocratic nose revealed time spent at the bottom of a bottle.

Furthermore, the man's clothing was expensive-looking but in poor repair, and the whiskers on his face suggested a sloppy man with little regard for how he was perceived. Benedict shook his head and chuckled. This must be another dissolute son of a noble house. Funny, in its own tragic way.

But something caught Benedict's eye just then. *No*…he thought, feeling his breath catch in his throat.

Benedict swallowed and lowered the wine bottle. When the other man mimicked this action, though, it became undeniable that this grim visage was, in fact, Benedict himself in a large gilt mirror he had not noticed. Benedict rubbed his cheek, marvelling at how red and tired his eyes appeared.

Though to the best of his recollection, it had only been four years since his mother had died and he had left his father's home to pursue a lifestyle of wantonness, those years weighed heavily on Benedict's still-not-unhandsome features.

Then his gaze fell upon the partygoers around him. His eyes whipped from one to the other—each and every one of them seemed to be staring right at him, their expressions coloured with mocking humour, pity, judgment.

Surely this has been enough socializing for another year, Benedict thought, realising he was already making his way to the exit and back toward freedom. He nodded, already having convinced himself of the rightness of this action.

In this month's letter, he could reassure his father that he was making an earnest effort to engage himself in civilization once more—*Father does not need to know this is merely a public ball, away from the eyes and ears of the blasted ton*—and thus keep his allowance flowing a bit longer.

* * *

Benedict smiled as he paused in front of Merrick's and breathed in the familiar smells of the place.

It was no less wretched than when he had first been carried here four years earlier, but each loose cobble and streak of grime was as well-known to him as beloved friends. The same wooden sign, faded into blankness, swung in the same fetid breeze. The same urchins greeted him from their nearby alley, gleefully chasing the pennies he always threw their way.

And, as ever, the same gargoyle of a man perched beside the door, barely lifting his head as he raised his voice in a snarl.

Benedict did not break his stride as he chirped before the giant's grunts could coalesce into words, "Put it on my tab, Wendell, won't you? There's a good man. Good evening to you."

A ham-like fist hovered in front of Benedict's chest, muscles knotted as the man held him in place without batting an eye. "Merrick says you still haven't paid last month, nor the month before that," snarled Wendell.

Feigning a look of exasperated remembrance, Benedict shook his head, patted the meaty appendage, and laughed lightly. “Thank you for refreshing my memory, my burly friend. I’ll speak with my father, the Duke, about it post-haste. Tell Merrick he can expect payment in full within the week.” He ducked under the massive arm to enter the club. And other than a final, resigned growl, the large man gave no response.

I had so hoped I could spend my time here incognito, Benedict thought with a twinge of regret. His adventures at Merrick’s remained as deliciously debauched as he had hoped, but his identity had remained a secret for little more than an afternoon. By the time Benedict had sobered up and remembered the promise he had extracted from the one-eyed bartender, they had already forged a friendship of liquor and debt.

Still, he couldn’t be too disappointed. Even when Benedict found himself scuffling in one of the club’s frequent brawls, few men dared lay a serious hand on him, knowing his identity. And, of course, even if his father’s letters were as scathing as they were infrequent, at least he could count on the rotten old bastard paying his debts. Not out of any paternal love, surely, but his father’s fear of inviting further scandal seemed to be just as efficacious for such things.

At least there is one benefit of being the son of a duke…

The club was busier than usual that night. Everywhere, the eye could see labourers in patched trousers happily squandering their wages on tankards of thick brown ale, boatmen punching one another into submission in happy camaraderie, and even the occasional harlot plying their honest trade among the merchants and thieves. Above it all, rose the blissful cacophony of shouting and singing, glass breaking and coins clinking against the bar.

“Over here, Benedict!” Benedict smiled. Long Robin and some of his other friends had already gotten started on the evening’s merriment.

“You lot couldn’t wait an hour before running up my tab, eh?” asked Benedict with a playful wag of his finger.

“Here, at least we saved you a seat,” said Long Robin in his gravelly baritone. “You might want to look before you sit, though, in case Samuels put a tack on it or anything.”

“I didn’t even!” protested the little teamster. Benedict took his seat and accepted the drink that was handed to him, laughing and shaking his head.

Before long, Benedict had swum his way into the happy depths of intoxication, and he found himself clapping Long Robin on the back as sweat beaded merrily on his brow. “I tell you, lads, you lot are the truest friends I’ve ever had.”

Laughter rippled around the table at this proclamation. “There’s a sad thing.”

“Poor Benedict must be worse off than we thought!” hiccupped Samuels.

“None of you chaps give a whit for where I come from or anything my family did years or…or centuries ago,” Benedict babbled, paying no heed to the other men’s words. “You don’t want me to be something I’m not, to keep up appearances. All you want from me is my friendship.”

This proclamation was met with an enthusiastic cheer from his fellows and a shower of liquor from cups crashing together. “To friendship!” they shouted as one.

“…And my father’s money, of course,” Benedict continued as laughter washed over him. “But hell, boys, so far as I can see that’s just the price of friendship. Everyone’s got their own price they exact from their friends—yours just happens to be easily paid in pounds and pence. And at least you’re honest about it!”

“Might as well be honest about *something,* eh, lads?” said Long Robin with a wink. The men broke once more into cheery laughter, and the tall man put his arm around Benedict’s shoulders, squeezing him tight as Benedict squirmed and cursed him convivially.

Now, this is how an evening should be spent by a young man in his prime, thought Benedict with a satisfied sigh. *Not posturing to try to climb the social ladder, not being hounded by every idle gossiper or relative with their own ideas of how you should behave. No, carousing and pursuing a life lived just for me—this is the life I want.*

At the edge of his perception, something flickered in and out of his awareness. Benedict had experienced it before, but he had no way to describe the sensation. It was like something that glittered brightly just out of sight of the corner of his mind’s eye. All he knew was that it was somehow important and immeasurably sad.

Usually, it came to him late in the night when he was lying awake in his bed, when he did not pass out from over drinking. Now, he found it extremely disarming to be visited by this feeling whilst among friends. It was sobering in all the worst ways, and threatened to sour

his comrades' laughter and encouragement in his ear.

Benedict shook his head with a scowl. He would chase away this sensation as he ever did. "This is the life," Benedict said aloud before downing the rest of his beverage to a round of cheers from the other men.

A distant roar drew Benedict's eye. Pouring through the door of the club was a rough-looking group of men, stirring up nearly as much of an uproar as Benedict's own party. He grimaced, recognising the men not personally but likely as one of London's many gangs of street ruffians.

But before turning back to his beer, something caught his eye. One of this band was much smaller than the others, slim as well as short, with a baggy coat and a hat pulled down over his face. And he was behaving differently than the others, neither shouting nor engaging in the same masculine shows of bravado as they all made their way to a table at the back of the club.

Something's odd here, Benedict thought. He had had enough to drink that he did not notice he was staring openly at the small man. Even when the man looked up, seemingly detecting his stare, Benedict did not turn his eyes away. Something strange and compelling flashed in the man's pale grey eyes.

Those eyes…Do I know him, somehow? Or…?

"Come on, Benedict, there's a game of Hazard going in the back," said Samuels, nudging Benedict in the ribs. "Stake me a toss, won't you?"

Benedict jumped at the contact. “I…yes, but…wait, who is—?” he stuttered. But when he looked back, the group had retreated to their table, and the small man was mostly obscured by some of his taller friends, sitting with his back to the wall.

“What’s going on? See someone you know?” Samuels scoffed. “Wouldn’t think the son of a duke would know anyone around here. Apart from scum like us, of course.”

“Nothing. I just thought I…Never mind, it’s nothing,” said Benedict, rising from his seat and patting Samuels on the shoulder.

The dice game was as thrilling as ever, Benedict was happy to discover. Between the excitement of money changing hands and the enthusiastic cheers and cries of disappointment, he realised he had forgotten all about the mysterious small man in the other room and about his earlier woes. Naturally, this realisation brought with it a swift return of these troubles, one that once again left Benedict furrowing his brow and draining another drink.

As Samuels was reaching to collect his meagre winnings from his most recent throw of the dice, Benedict watched as a large man from the rowdy group of toughs, casually tossed his shoulder into Samuels’ as he was walking past to his table.

Samuels pitched forward, scattering his coins across the floor and only just catching himself before his chin connected with the table. Benedict reached forward to help his friend collect himself, but the little man was already up on his feet.

“Here, now, watch where you’re going!” Samuels bellowed, his face

instantly redder than it had already been from the liquor.

The man who had bumped him turned to face Samuels. He was a mean-looking sort, lean and wiry, with a long scar running down one unshaven cheek. He was also more than a head taller than Samuels. The man looked Samuels' quivering frame up and down, glanced back at his friends, and chuckled, "Didn't see you down there. Can't imagine why."

Benedict closed his eyes and stifled a sigh. Even when he was sober, Samuels did not respond to comments about his stature with an overabundance of grace or humour. Tonight he seemed in a hurry to justify Benedict's fears—scarcely had the scarred man's words left his mouth before Samuels shoved the man back against his table with both arms and threw off his jacket.

"Might want to be more careful, friend," Samuels jeered, putting his fists up. "You might step in something more dangerous than you can handle."

The man with the scar straightened, any humour gone from his face, and was joined by his two equally grim-looking friends, each bigger than the last. The other gamblers retreated, their game forgotten, as the three men advanced on Samuels. The small man only laughed maniacally as he took in the improbable odds before him.

*Damn it all, Samuels…*Benedict groaned. *You really are mad, aren't you?*

The man Samuels had shoved reached out a ropey arm, and Benedict was on his feet before he could weigh his options or talk any sense into himself. The next thing he knew, he was swinging his fist into the chin of the man with the scar. The blow connected with a sickening

crack that left Benedict's hand singing with pain.

Everything moved at once. Benedict's mind struggled to catch up with what was transpiring, though he was dimly aware he was dancing away from the counterpunch of a tall man with a lazy eye, colliding with a table, kicking a chair into the third man with an agility that surprised him. Samuels was there as well, wailing like a banshee. Benedict could not determine if it was a cry of victory or pain.

At some point, he realised two of the assailants were on the floor and the third was nowhere to be seen. Benedict felt himself for any injury and was relieved to discover none save a raw ache in his knuckles. *Four years of living in a bottle does not seem to have dulled my athletic prowess,* he thought with wonderment.

Then there was another sound like a thunderclap, and the room turned abruptly onto its side. Benedict had nearly figured out what was going on by the time he collided with the floor and was swallowed up by darkness.

* * *

"Come on, love, enough with all the misery. The job didn't go as bad as all that, did it? If it did we wouldn't have the money nor time to waste in this pit!"

Marie looked up into the bleary, red-streaked eyes of her father, Mark Devons. Though his hair had grown greasy and his beard unkempt, she couldn't help but smile at those same smiling grey eyes that she'd known for her whole life.

“It’s not that, Father,” she said, reaching out to pat him genially on the arm. “Will and Jeb and I did just fine. It’s just that I’m…not much in the mood for celebrating, that’s all.”

Marie winced as the sound of breaking glass split the air. She pulled her cap down tighter over the curls that were piled on top of her head. *I think I may have finally had enough of places like this,* Marie thought grimly as she sipped her drink. *Merrick may say his place is open to women in the modern style, but I don’t know any girl unwise enough to be seen here without a pimp watching over her. Not with men like Jeb and the rest of our gang out looking for some way to prove themselves.*

Marie sighed and let her eyes drift up and above the ruckus taking place all around her. It wouldn’t be long before she never had to put up with such places again. *Ammy and I will be safe at last,* she thought, feeling a dreamy smile come to her lips.

Gower’s Grove certainly has its problems, but those will be Father’s problems to solve with the gang. All we will have to worry about is keeping a proper shop, dealing with customers. We will live in a proper house, too, right above the shop. Before long, she will find a good country boy to marry, and I will…

“I don’t like that look of yours,” muttered her father. She blinked and looked at him with a curious expression. “You’re thinking about leaving again, aren’t you?”

Marie blinked. Drink may have dulled her father’s senses, but he was still a far savvier man than anyone else she knew.

Mark shook his head and coughed out a disappointed sigh. “It’s no

good thing, you know, you leaving me alone here to take care of things. No one gets those boys behaving right the way you do, especially when I can scarcely remember all the accounts and debts from one day to the next."

"We can't very well stay here in London forever, can we?" she asked, feeling her temper flare. "Amelia deserves better than that, Father. She deserves a proper life—honestly, so do I. We're your daughters, Father. This life isn't right for us."

"And what are we supposed to do after you leave to go play shopkeeper, then?" said Mark in a dejected voice.

"Father, you'll do just fine," said Marie as she leaned over and kissed Mark sweetly on the top of his head, trying not to notice how clammy his skin felt or how much thinner his hair had become.

He snorted, then raised his empty hands in front of her and fixed her with a sceptical look. Marie stifled a gasp, seeing clearly in the lamplight just how worn and wrinkled his hands were, and how badly they shook. "I wish I were as certain of that, daughter. I truly do."

"I…" Marie could not summon another word in defence of her decision. Her imagination conjured a parade of horrific images before her weary eyes. She saw her father led off in manacles to the Tower of London, and Will with his hands struck off at the wrist by a guardsman. She saw the gang executed as thieves, and with them, any hope of survival for the people of Gower's Grove. Suddenly, it seemed a very terrible and selfish thing she was intending to do.

Leaving the gang is the right thing to do, she reminded herself. *…Isn't it? I promised Ammy that I would leave, so she and I could open our shop as*

soon as it was possible. I can't break my word to my little sister, especially when she's already lost Mother and gone through so much. And of course, it's not as though staying here with the gang feels any more right. Even if from time to time the work can be almost—

A loud crash from a few tables away drew Marie's attention away from such sober contemplation. She saw Jeb and two of the other boys in the gang were swinging their fists at a well-dressed stranger with hair the colour of sand. Marie rolled her eyes and shook her head disdainfully. "I do wish they would stop behaving like this. Picking fights like this is going to get them in over their heads before they know it," she muttered.

She looked away, wishing the fight could be over and praying they would not be removed from the club by force. But after a quiet moment, she could not help but glance over just in time to see Jeb crack the stranger in the back of the head with an empty bottle.

Marie heard herself cry out in protest at such a disreputable attack, and when she saw Jeb grab the unconscious victim by the shirt and pull him off the ground to strike him again, she was on her feet and at Jeb's side before she could breathe.

"What kind of way is that for a man to behave, striking a man when he's already down?" Marie spat as she held onto Jeb's collar. "Are you trying to kill him because he played your game with you a little too well?" The tall man was red-faced, sinews straining and muscles knotted with the lust for violence, but she shook him with one hand fearlessly, and it only took a second of those steely grey eyes fixed on him to persuade Jeb to drop the stranger and turn away in shame, muttering curses.

"Lord in heaven…"

Marie looked down to see Will bending over the unconscious stranger. His face had turned white as a sheet. “What is it, Will?” she asked, her stomach twisting into a knot. “Is he…?”

Will looked up at her and grunted in negation. “He’s alive, all right. But that’s not all he is. Jeb’s just knocked out the son of the Duke of Preston.”

Fighting to keep herself breathing, Marie felt the room sway worryingly around her. All her hopes, all her plans for the happy life she was going to provide for herself and her sister were shut away as though entombed in a stone tower. “*Preston*? H–how do you…are you sure?” she stammered, leaning on a nearby table to keep herself upright.

Will straightened and dusted off his jacket. Nearby other patrons of the club began to clear out, as sure of the danger to come as Marie herself was. “I heard his mate call him the son of a duke, and I heard the rotten boy of the bloody Duke of Preston spends his time in holes like this. Besides, look at the ring.”

“Right, lads, you’ve made a jolly mess of things here,” came a booming voice from behind Marie. The gang looked to their leader respectfully as Mark stepped forward and began barking orders. “Get it cleaned up, Jeb. There’s a good lad. The rest of you help him. We don’t want to put out poor Mister Merrick any more than we already have. Except you, Fogerty. I want you to run and grab the cart and horses. Quick-like, now, don’t dawdle.”

The gang snapped to follow his orders. Marie frowned. This excited affect in her father rarely boded well. “Father, what are you thinking? This isn’t—”

Mark put his hands on Marie's shoulders and looked into her eyes with a winning twinkle she had not seen in her father in some time. "Marie, girl, what happens next is all up to you," he said sweetly. "I need you to take the gent back to the hideout in Gower's Grove. Ride the horses hard, try and get him back before morning. Make sure you tie him up before having Fogerty throw him in the cart, just in case he wakes up before that."

"Why? What are we going to do, Mark?" Jeb blurted. Mark silenced him and sent him back to work sweeping up glass with a single look.

"We're going to get our biggest pay-out ever," said Mark to his daughter, his voice full of hunger.

Chapter 3

In and Out of the Dark

Benedict's eyes opened, and he immediately wished they hadn't. Though only a small motion, it was enough to send pain ringing through his body. He cried out, feeling the breath stolen from his lungs, and shut his eyes once more.

Where…what happened? he thought over the pounding that echoed in his ears. *I'm on the ground…Am I still at the club?*

When eventually Benedict gritted his teeth and summoned the fortitude to open his eyes once more, he immediately realised how little good the gesture did him. Only darkness surrounded him.

Where the hell am I?

After a careful scan of his body, Benedict realised he was not seriously injured, but when he tried to rise from the ground, he found that his hands were bound behind him with coarse rope. Eventually, his eyes adjusted to the darkness sufficiently to enable him to deduce that he was, in fact, tied up on the floor of an old cellar.

He felt his breath quicken, his heartbeat resounding harder and louder in his ears as pain continued to radiate from his crown. *Don't panic, stay calm,* Benedict told himself, closing his eyes once more. *Whatever has happened, there's no sense letting yourself succumb to despair. Try to remember what happened, that's the first step.*

Gradually bits and pieces of memories floated up through his consciousness. He remembered Long Robin and his other friends, and he remembered stepping into a fight on Samuels' behalf for some reason. There were some tough-looking men in nondescript brown clothing, he thought, and—

From somewhere above his head came the bang of wood and stone, and a narrow shaft of yellow light poured down into the cellar. Benedict watched, unsure if he should feign unconsciousness, as a silhouette descended the stairs on the wall in front of him. When the soft footsteps ceased, he could not help but flutter open his eyes, squinting at the burning yellow beacon in the hand of the figure that stood before him.

"You're awake," said a woman's voice in a relieved tone. Benedict blinked, forcing his eyes to focus on the sight of the woman dressed in men's clothing.

As she stepped closer to him, the flickering light of the candle borne in her gloved hand, Benedict found himself unable to help but admire her darkly feminine features. Her lips were plump and pursed together in consternation, her cheekbones high above smooth, soft cheeks.

Though she was queerly clad in breeches and a long brown coat of dubious cleanliness, the woman's wide hips and generous breasts were still plainly visible, as was her head of luxuriously thick black curls. Most striking of all were her eyes, which were pale and possessed of a keenness that seemed strangely familiar to him.

"Miss, I—thank God you're here," Benedict said in a rush, not wishing to take any more time to search his memory. "I don't know what's

happened, but I believe I've been taken prisoner by a gang of thieves. If you can run and cry for help, I can…."

He stopped, another memory finally assembled in his mind. There was a reason this woman was wearing the same clothing as the gang who attacked him, he realised—she must have been the smallest man who came in with them, the one with the grey eyes. The temptation that had run through Benedict at this vision before him vanished, replaced by the chill of fear.

"Where have you taken me?" he asked, trying not to let his panic show in his voice. "What do you want?"

The young woman did not reply to Benedict's questions. Instead, she wordlessly walked over to his side and inspected the rope that tied his hands together.

Benedict raised his voice, hoping to alert any possible allies upstairs. "Do you know who it is you've kidnapped? I am a very important man from a very powerful family."

Apparently finding his bonds sufficiently tight, the woman retrieved what appeared to be an earthenware water pitcher and a somewhat burned-looking loaf of bread from a basket by the stairs. Not meeting Benedict's gaze, she set these things in the corner near him.

"You had best release me now, you know. By now, my father will have sent for the guards, perhaps even the military, to secure my freedom." Still, she had no answer to his words as she busied herself lighting a crude oil lamp and setting it on a small shelf on the wall. "You don't know what they do to kidnappers, do you? Even to women. But I'm sure they will show mercy if you let me go before

they arrive."

Apart from a slight widening of the woman's bemused smile, she gave no reply to this appeal.

Benedict muttered a curse under his breath. It was clear that this mysterious woman would not be eager to help him in his current predicament. Then again, he realised, when had he ever encountered difficulty getting women to do as he bid them?

She may be unlike any woman I have known before, thought Benedict desperately, *but she is still a woman, after all. And I have not known any woman to be able to resist my charms.*

Licking his dry and cracked lips, Benedict tried to conjure the feeling of attraction he had for the woman not two minutes earlier. Finding this an easy task, he adopted a simpering smile and said, "I suppose it's not so bad, really. I should count my blessings. Of all the Englishmen who have the bad fortune to be kidnapped, I doubt any have ever had a more comely jailor."

The woman stopped in her task. She looked at him, her pale eyes wide and inquisitive. "You…think me comely?" she asked incredulously, putting a hand up to her chest. Her voice was sweet, mellifluous, dripping with naiveté. "Even…even in this situation, even dressed as I am?"

Benedict flashed his most winning smile. "I may be a prisoner, but I am not blind. Even from here on the floor, it's clear you are more than the equal of any silly actress or artist's model." The girl smiled and looked away demurely, and he felt hope surge within him.

“Of course…” He shifted his position awkwardly on the floor, affecting a wince as he strained his wrists against their bonds. “…It may be that I am just seeing you from an odd angle. I’m sure if I were to be allowed on my feet, I would be able to see how beautiful you truly are.”

The woman looked at him blankly as though not understanding what he was asking. Benedict laughed softly as if this were all a delightful miscommunication. “Though I, ah, might need your help with accomplishing that,” he said lightly. “Please?”

Hope withered in Benedict’s breast as the woman broke out in mocking laughter, shaking the flickering light of the candle crazily about the small cellar. Her laugh was surprisingly musical, though the degree to which it cut straight to Benedict’s pride was alarming.

“Lord Preston,” said the woman with an amused shake of her head, “if you think you will win your freedom through your powers of seduction, you’re even more conceited than the other noblemen I’ve had the misfortune of meeting.” After looking Benedict up and down and giving a disappointed *tsk,* the woman took her now empty basket and retreated up the stairs. He heard the door close behind her… though his keen ears did not detect the sound of a lock or latch.

“Well,” Benedict muttered to himself, “I suppose there’s no sense waiting around for her to come back and free me. Especially as they can’t even get my title correct.” Trying to ignore the pounding ache in his head, he rolled onto his back and looked up at the dank wooden ceiling. He heard footsteps going back and forth just above his head—only one person, as far as he could tell.

His mind ran through the scenario that presented itself, feeling clearer

and sharper than it had in years. *The oil lamp could be an opportunity,* he mused. *If I toppled it and started a fire, perhaps someone would come to my aid before the fire consumed what little air is down here?* Benedict nearly laughed at the preposterousness of this plan. *The water pitcher, then? I could break it and use one of the shards as a weapon? If I can find some way to get my hands untied first, at least…*

Shifting his uncomfortable position slightly, Benedict hissed as he felt a sudden sharp pain in his thigh. Reaching his hands down to find the source of the pain, he grinned as his fingers found what seemed to be a forgotten nail by the wall.

Old and rusty, it seems, but plenty sharp. It should do the trick. It was slow work using the nail to pierce the fibres of the rope, especially being unable to see what he was doing. But after jabbing himself by accident only a couple of times, within ten minutes, Benedict was on his feet, his hands untied.

Benedict rubbed his sore wrists and quietly stepped toward the stairs. He briefly considered following through with his plan to use a piece of broken pottery as a knife…then dismissed this idea as too noisy and, just as importantly, too unnecessarily vicious to use on a woman. *Even if she is a robber and a kidnapper*.

Instead, he took the stairs and exited the cellar empty-handed, holding his breath and trying not to make the wooden boards creak too terribly under his feet. The cellar door was unlocked as he had hoped, and Benedict pushed it open a crack and put his eye to it.

Wherever it was he had been taken, it was not a large or extravagant place. From his position, Benedict saw only a single room with another door at the far end. There was a wide but well-worn window through which warm yellow light fell on something green. It looked to be late morning, perhaps, and he was either near the Gardens or else

had been taken far from London.

A flicker of orange light and the smell of smoke told him a meagre fire was burning in the hearth. Best of all, as he opened the door a bit more, he saw only one occupant in the room, the same woman in breeches and a man's coat, seated at a desk with her back to him. Her black curls shook slightly with a steady rhythm, perhaps she was writing something?

Benedict silently prayed to any god that would listen for the strength and skill he would need to make his escape. Slowly he pushed the door the rest of the way open and tiptoed across the room. When he was barely five yards away from the door and freedom, one of the rough floorboards squeaked beneath his feet. The woman drew herself straight and turned around to see Benedict, a look of anger and fear passing before her pale grey eyes.

"What are you—" she asked as she rose from her seat. Benedict saw her gaze flicker to a knife lying on a table a few feet away. As she moved to retrieve it, Benedict leapt at the woman with all his might. She was quicker than he had expected, though, and dodged his attack though he was successful in keeping her away from the knife.

"Out of my way, miss," said Benedict with an edge in his voice. "I'm going out that door one way or another, but I'd rather not have to hurt you on my way."

"He's loose!" she yelled as they eyed one another warily. "Come quickly!"

Who's she yelling to? thought Benedict with a gulp. *What's that behind me? Footsteps?* Benedict glanced behind him for just an instant, but

that proved to be more than enough time for the girl to lunge in his direction, her small fist only narrowly missing his face. She came at him like a panther, arms and legs swinging wildly as he pushed to approach the exit, and she tried to draw him away from the glittering silver weapon on the nearby table top.

Benedict grunted with exertion as he finally managed to catch her by the wrist. He smirked. She was fierce, without a doubt, but he was still larger and stronger than her. But then, with a murderous cry, she pushed them against the table, he lost his balance, and their two intertwined bodies tumbled to the ground.

They landed on the wooden floor of the house with a crash. Benedict's hands soon found the young woman's wrists and pinned them to the ground. Thinking quickly, he used his body weight to secure her legs in place as well. She squirmed and twisted in his grasp, her face flushing and contorting with rage, but Benedict held her fast against the floor.

Despite the danger, he knew he still faced, the position they had fallen into felt strangely intimate. After all, Benedict had been in similar postures with other women, albeit without quite as much enthusiasm on either part.

The thick mass of curly black hair that the woman tossed about with her exertions, the colour that came prettily to her pale cheeks, the tensing of her muscles that he felt against his limbs…the whole experience was disarming in its sensuousness.

So taken was Benedict by holding her in this compromising position, especially now that the girl was rendered helpless, that he could not resist the impish desire to gloat. "Frankly," he said with an arched eyebrow, "this wasn't how I expected having a woman beneath me today. But then, I—"

Another terrible thump sound.

Another sharp pain at the crown of his head.

Again blackness washed over him.

* * *

With a mighty heave, Marie pushed the unconscious Benedict off of her and clambered to her feet. Bosom heaving under her man's shirt from the exertion of their struggle, she picked up the knife from the ground and looked at it ruefully. "Lot of good you did over here," she muttered, then strapped it to her belt and leaned her weight against the wall, fighting to catch her breath.

"Marie, are you…are you all right?"

Marie glanced up and smiled at her saviour, her sister. Amelia stood there rooted in place, still clutching a rusty old pan in both hands. It was obvious how wide and frightened Amelia's grey eyes were, how her knuckles were white and shaking as they clutched the pan tightly. *The poor girl is terrified,* she thought with a grimace, and pushed herself away from the wall to embrace Amelia tightly.

"I'm just fine, Ammy," she said calmly, taking the pan and setting it down on the floor before embracing her sister again. "Thanks to you, at least." Marie felt Amelia's posture relax a bit in her arms, but both

their hearts were still pounding at a near-deafening volume.

Amelia broke free of Marie's arms and carefully approached the collapsed Benedict, facedown on the floor. "Oh, Marie," she said, her voice thick with revulsion. "Is he…?"

Marie knelt down beside him and examined the place where Amelia had struck him. "He'll have a goose egg there for a few days, but I don't see any blood. You didn't hurt him too badly, I don't think." She looked up at her sister and grinned. "You're not bad with that thing, you know. Maybe you should be out collecting debts with Will and Jeb while I stay home and do the cooking, after all."

Amelia crossed her arms. "Don't joke about such things, Marie. You know I don't like thinking about you out there robbing and…and beating people."

For half a heartbeat, Marie felt her temper flare at this chastisement. *It may be distasteful, sister, but it's only by the gang's labour that you or anyone else in this village has food on our tables,* she thought. But sisterly protectiveness quickly dispelled this feeling. "Sorry," Marie said soberly. "Here, let's get him back down in the cellar. You take his feet."

It took a great deal of effort for the sisters to carry their unconscious prisoner down the steps and set him back onto the cellar floor. Once, the man groaned in pain, and Amelia nearly dropped him in surprise. But before too long, he was back in his prison, his hands bound twice as tight as before, by Marie's nimble fingers.

Amelia scratched her head and examined the ruins of rope lying on the floor as she caught her breath from their exertion. "But how did

he get loose in the first place?"

"Here's the culprit," said Marie as she picked up a rusty nail and held it aloft between two fingers. She frowned, noting how neatly their prisoner had used it to split the rope.

"We'd better check the room again, make sure there's nothing else he can use to escape," Amelia said with a worried finger at her lip.

Marie nodded. "I was thinking the same thing. You start at that wall and we'll meet in the middle."

The sisters began scouring the rough earthen floor of the old cellar, looking for any other potential tools or weapons that could be scavenged. "I suppose the lamp will have to go. Don't want him getting desperate and burning down the house," Marie grumbled. "And I shan't be able to leave food or water here. I can't very well imagine how he might use a loaf of bread to escape, but best not to tempt fate, just in case."

Amelia tittered at the thought. "Does that mean you'll have to stand here and feed him by hand, then?"

"I certainly hope not. Maybe Will can have that job when he gets here from London."

"At least he isn't bad looking, though, is he?" Amelia giggled as Marie looked at her with a shocked expression. She craned her neck to examine Benedict's face and gave an approving nod. "You've got eyes as well as I do, sister. Don't you think he's handsome, at least a bit?"

Marie opened her mouth to vigorously deny this idea, but upon looking at Benedict a bit longer in thought, she found herself nodding after all. Despite everything, he looked oddly peaceful, even angelic in this state, as though he were only sleeping, and his strong chin and masculine brow were not unappealing. Even his clothing, dusty and rumpled though it was, was a lord's clothing, and it fit his athletic body in an attractive manner.

"Fine, I own he's handsome enough in his own way," Marie said as they shared a laugh. Then Marie grew serious once more and extended a finger in warning to Amelia. "But don't let your guard down just for a pretty face. A handsome man can hurt you just as much as an ugly one—worse, even, if you don't see the danger until it's too late."

Amelia rolled her eyes and went back to her task of combing the floor. "Yes, yes, fine."

"I mean it, Ammy," Marie continued, feeling herself growing angry for some reason. "Don't go trusting a man just because he smiles at you or has straight teeth. This rascal was much stronger than I would have expected for a rich man, and quicker as well, and those expectations nearly got me killed. You have to learn not to take things for granted. Don't get sloppy, and don't trust anyone who isn't family. That'll get you in more trouble than you can get yourself out of."

Then it hit Marie like a frying pan across the face—she was furious with herself for needing to be rescued by her little sister. *How did I let him catch me unawares? If Ammy hadn't been here to help, the fool son of a duke would have run off, and then we'd all be in the soup pot…and it all would have been my fault.*

“I *know*, Marie, you’ve been telling me all that for years,” Amelia grumbled. She straightened and put her hands on her narrow hips. “And anyway, that’s all well and good for you in London, but that’s no way for a woman to live. Now that we’re opening the shop here in the village, don’t you think it’s time we start trying to live like normal people instead of criminals?”

Marie bit her lip. Her conversation with their father was still fresh in her mind, as were all the doubts that had been dredged up at the club. “Yes, of course. It’s just…” Marie paused to search for the correct words.

Amelia’s face twisted in anger. “You’ve changed your mind about opening our shop.”

“No, it’s not that. Of course not!” Marie protested. “But especially for a little while after we ransom this Lord Preston back to his father, you understand, things will have to be handled very delicately. All eyes will be on us in London, and that’s something the gang cannot afford. Especially because Father is getting on, you know, and—”

But Amelia was finished listening. She wheeled, her long skirt twirling gently and sending the light from the oil lamp dancing, then stomped away up the stairs.

“For God’s sake, Ammy, I’m telling you it’s just for a little while longer!” Marie called after her sister.

Amelia did not stop in her flight but called back over her shoulder, “I’ve heard that song before, Marie! Don’t expect me to keep falling for your stories and excuses forever.”

Marie glowered at the unconscious man on the floor in front of her. She was stricken with a strange urge to kick her frustrations out on his prone form…but instead, she merely settled for shaking her head as she sat on the bottom step to watch Benedict.

“You’d better be worth all this trouble, my lord,” she grumbled, running her fingers through her hair with a sour expression.

Chapter 4

Male Ambitions

Long minutes stretched into long hours. More than once, Marie found herself wishing she had had the foresight to bring one of those silly romance novels other women always seemed to be reading. At least that would help her pass the time. As it was, all she could do was watch Benedict's unconscious form with his back resting against the wall, drum her fingers on her thigh, and try not to let herself think too much of the future.

As difficult as she found that task, Marie found herself entirely taken by surprise by her emotional response to Benedict coughing, then groaning, then opening his eyes and looking directly at her.

A thousand competing feelings raced through her at once: relief that the man had not been killed by his most recent blow to the head; excitement that her long stretch of boredom and terrifying introspection had come to an end; fear of what this stranger might attempt to do in his wrath; anxiety over how she could overcome another escape attempt if it came; and, bizarrely, a blushing realisation that Amelia was right—he was indeed a strikingly handsome man after all.

In an instant, after this eternity of confusion, somehow Marie ended up flashing him a winning smile and blurting, "You…you're awake!" The feeling of embarrassment that followed this outcry was much less complex.

“Yes, it seems you’ve failed to kill me once again,” coughed Benedict as he strained to shift his body weight off his arm. He looked at her with a pained expression, albeit not one without a modicum of humour. “Still, better luck next time. I’m sure with a bit more practise, you should have my skull caved in, in no time.”

Marie folded her arms and drew herself straighter from her position sitting on the bottom step. “We didn’t want to do you any harm, you know. *You* attacked me in your escape attempt, if you don’t remember.”

Benedict scoffed, then drew in a sharp breath and closed his eyes as though the action caused him some pain. Marie felt herself move to stand and go to his side but restrained herself as soon as she realised what she was doing. “It seems neither of us got what we wanted, then,” he said through clenched teeth.

“I suppose not.”

The man’s eyes fluttered open again, staring at her pointedly. Marie was stricken by how even in the shaky orange light of the oil lamp by her side, they were the iciest blue she had ever seen. And even under his onerous circumstances, still, those eyes danced with self-assured mirth that was absolutely disarming.

“Woe is us, indeed, to encounter such thorough failure. Have there ever been two more unfortunate souls?” he asked with a wink.

Despite herself, Marie felt a laugh escape her lips at his comment. She stifled it quickly, returning a haughty scowl to her face. *He’s only trying to charm you into letting your guard down, foolish girl,* she told herself. *You know better than to fall for that. It would be best to remove*

yourself from the room entirely now and have Amelia come check on him a little later.

Benedict gave a groan of pain as he struggled.

"We tied you tighter this time," said Marie in what she hoped would be a haughty tone of voice. "We also found your little nail and made sure there are no more tools like that at hand. You won't escape this time."

Benedict grunted as he began to rock back and forth against the wall, brow furrowed in concentration. "Oh, I shouldn't think so," he said casually despite his strange efforts. "There's no escape from the notorious kidnappers known only as Mad Alice and her Crew of Cutthroats."

"That's not my name," said Marie before she could stop herself.

"No, no, of course not, I knew that." Still, he continued to push himself to and fro, bumping periodically against the wall and wincing as he did so. "Your name doesn't even begin with a vowel, does it?"

"It…it's none of your business," Marie snapped. "And stop doing that."

"Does it start with an 'L,' then, by chance?"

"Possibly, but I—what on Earth is it you are trying to do?"

Benedict stopped his strange activity, slackening against the earthen ground beneath him as he breathed out in frustration. He looked over to her wryly. “Since you asked, my arm hurts terribly. I’m assuming it’s from being unconscious in this position for so long and not that you and the Cutthroats have pierced it with needles, so I am trying to trying to sit up with my back against the wall of your charming dungeon.”

And with that, Benedict went back to his mad wiggling on the floor. He shook himself with such vigour that a bit of dirt fell down onto his face from the ceiling. After spitting it out with a disgusted look on his face, he went right back to rocking himself, his hands twitching impotently behind his back.

Marie sighed in frustration. She looked up the stairs, then stood and carefully approached Benedict, who was obviously getting no further in his endeavour. “Look, why don’t you just let me help you? As long as you don’t try anything, I—”

The man fixed her with a bizarrely intense look of seriousness that stilled her words in her throat. “I’m sorry, I don’t accept help from strange women. You can help once we’ve been properly introduced, not sooner.” Then he returned to his vain attempt to get himself off his side, somehow leaving a red scrape on his brow in the process.

“Bloody hell, Lord Preston,” Marie grumbled, trying to stay her laughter at this ridiculous situation. “Here, I’ll—”

“Come no closer! I’ll scream to the heavens if you touch me without telling me your name!” Benedict yelled, his eyes growing wide. Marie could not tell if he was honestly alarmed or merely joking.

“I’m called Marie, for God’s sake. Now—”

“Marie, what?”

“Marie *Devons*!” she snapped, arms spread wide in disbelief. “Now, if that’s not enough of an introduction for you, my lord, I’ll happily clear out and leave you to sit in the dark, uncomfortable or not!”

All the intensity evaporated from his face in a flash. “A pleasure to meet you, Miss Devons,” he said, smiling. “Benedict Carlton, Marquess of Elebury. My father is the Duke of Preston, as you may already know, but I’m rightfully called ‘Lord Elebury.’”

“Yes, yes, fine.” Marie gave a patronizingly deep curtsy as though presenting herself to the king himself. “If I might be permitted to assist Lord Elebury in sitting up?” she asked with sweet sarcasm.

“Ah, yes, lovely, thank you, Miss Devons.”

Marie roughly grabbed Benedict by his collar and tugged hard to one side. His muscles shifting beneath her, she found that he was sitting upon his bottom, back against the wall, with relatively little effort on her part. Suspecting she’d been deceived, she stepped back hurriedly, one hand reaching for her knife, but saw that he was now sitting contentedly in place and looking up at her with gratitude.

“That’s much better,” he sighed. “Now we can have a proper conversation, you and I.”

“Thank God for that,” Marie grunted as she released the knife from her grip and looked down at him with arms folded. She was suddenly quite tired, and from the sweat that glinted on his handsome, unlined brow, so was he. Hearing voices upstairs, Marie wondered if she should leave the cellar so she could see if her father had arrived.

“I wanted to ask…that wasn’t you who hit me upstairs, now, was it, Miss Devons?” said Benedict, shaking his head as if to clear away dust.

Marie gave no answer but a roll of her eyes, irritated at being pulled back into his games. *I’ve helped this fool enough. No need to give him any more information about the gang.*

“No, I suppose not,” said Benedict after a few moments of waiting. His eye roamed over her in a way that was appreciative yet not off-putting. “Being in two places at once is not among your many virtues, I don’t think. On that front, you’re limited to the raven-black hair, keen wit, buxom form—”

“You may as well save your energy,” sighed Marie with a shake of her head. “Flirting will get you nowhere, I assure you.”

“Rubbish,” said Benedict without hesitation. Marie blinked with surprise. “Even if you are indeed enough of a hardened, bloodthirsty bandit not to let me go, flirting always wins me a kiss, at the very least.” He smiled, his teeth dazzling even in the low lamplight. “Always, I tell you.”

“Not this time,” she laughed scornfully. “Not with me.”

“That’s only because you left in such a hurry.” Benedict licked his lips subtly, smirking at her with all the confidence of a cockerel in the yard. “You haven’t had the pleasure of seeing me when I’m in proper form for really excellent carousing. But I promise you, Miss Devons, I have never failed to get a kiss, sooner or later. It’s only a matter of time until it works on you, too.”

“Believe what you will. I won’t free you and I certainly won’t kiss you.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure about that. Especially because I can see things from this angle that I promise you other men would likely ignore. For starters, I’ll bet no one has ever told you just how far your hips stick out, especially wearing men’s breeches as you are.”

Marie scowled, resisting the urge to glance down at herself and see the truth of what he was saying.

“Oh, it’s not unflattering,” he protested, that infuriating smile still on his face. “It may spoil the illusion that you are a terrifying thief, perhaps, but it suggests a sort of fecund beauty that one sees in some of the great aesthetic works. Your hair, as well, is not styled in a way that I tend to see, but the way it catches the light and so joyfully dances as you move….”

Lord, how can one man contain such volume of wind? Marie thought, trying to dismiss his sweet words as they entered her ear. *There must be some way to shut him up*…The idea that came to her was wicked, yet strangely compelling, enough so that she relented to it without thinking and planted a kiss right on Benedict’s lips.

His words were immediately silenced as Marie's lips made contact with his, then turned to a soft sound of pleasure as the two kissed with a passion that was as instantaneous as it was surprising to both of them.

I had only meant to give him a quick peck, she thought as her eyes closed and her heart hammered harder in her chest. *I should put an end to this*. But still, her lips lingered against his, his warm mouth grappling for purchase against hers for a moment that stretched into an eternity.

Pulling away from the kiss felt like pushing off from the bottom of the ocean, fighting a thousand strange tangled tentacles that were reluctant to let go. Marie had no idea why, but she wanted nothing more than to continue the kiss longer and longer still, to reach her hand up and brush against his masculine jaw, to feel his arms pull her closer…but end it she did, as she knew she must.

"There," said Marie, feeling her breath catch in her throat. "N–now that that's over with, you can stop your vain attempts to free yourself."

His eyes fluttered open once more, his lips flushed and his breathing coming harder. As he met her gaze, in a rush, Marie realised how terrifically she must be blushing.

Without another word, she spun around and left the cellar, only just barely remembering to take the oil lamp with her. She blushed not only from surprise and embarrassment at her own impulsive actions, she knew—*Bloody hell, what did I just tell Amelia not more than a few hours ago?*—but because in her twenty years, she had never been kissed like that before.

* * *

The view from the window had always been a beautiful one to Amelia Devons. Though she was told the village was a relatively modest one, and their one glass window faced the village green instead of the beautiful rocky seaside to the east, it overlooked an ancient oak that was almost like a friend to Amelia. As a girl, she had loved to collect its massive orange leaves in the autumn and play in its shade in the summer heat. Now that she was nearly a grown woman, she loved that she could still look out and see it standing watch over her home.

Lately, she found she had been spending more and more time sitting by the window. But it was not to gaze at the great tree that felt as though it were her last remaining friend. No, now Amelia looked out for Jeb or Hungry Edward or any of the other members of her father's gang, come to deliver the tragic news that she was certain was destined to arrive sooner or later.

This had become Amelia's daily life as of late—taking care of the house, helping her neighbours, half-heartedly reading, and all with an eye to the window.

Today was different, though. Today she neglected the window entirely, for trouble was not coming, it had already arrived. It was inside her family's house.

Marie's been down there with the man practically all day. It's well past noon now…What could they be doing down there? thought Amelia as she tried vainly to keep her attention on her stew pot. Every time she tried to push her dull old kitchen knife through an onion, though, her imagination raced with the possibilities of what could be occupying

Marie and their prisoner, that awful blond nobleman who seemed to be so important.

I wonder if I hit him too hard, after all? she thought, sniffling as tears ran down her cheeks. *Perhaps he is dead or made simple by the blow. Or it could be that Marie is beating him horribly for his attempted escape.* A chill ran down Amelia's spine at the thought. *What is it my sister does in London for so long? And why is she so unwilling to—*

Amelia jumped with surprise when she was taken unawares by the door being swung open and banging against the wall. The smell of salt on the breeze poured in, carrying with it another smell that made her wrinkle her nose.

"Bit dirty round here, isn't it? Has nobody been cleaning?" grumbled Will as he plodded through the door and collapsed with a thump on the creaky, threadbare sofa by the fireplace. Amelia's eye flitted to the door left swinging in the wind, the mud the bewhiskered man had tracked across the floor, the dirty gloves he still wore as he stretched his arms out along the top of the sofa.

"Hello, Will," Amelia softly, trying to keep the dislike out of her voice.

"What've you got to eat?" he shouted back to her as he scratched his chin with dirty fingers. "Any of that fish pie you lot get here? It's been ages since I've had a good fish pie."

"I'm making stew, but it isn't ready yet. I haven't even put it on the fire."

Will looked at her with his flinty eyes. “Well hurry it up, then. Travelling is hard on a man, even if it’s just from London. Works up an appetite something horrible.”

Amelia crossed her arms, glaring at Will from the doorway to the back of the house. “Father sent a note with Marie and said to be ready for him in the afternoon with a pot of stew. If you want to argue, take it up with your boss, not me.”

“All right, all right!” Will muttered to himself as he rose from the sofa, plucked an old apple from a plate, and took a bite.

“Honestly,” Amelia grumbled to herself as she swept the rest of the chopped meat and vegetables into the stew pot and carried it over to the hearth. “Marie can’t leave soon enough for my taste. Then I won’t have to put up with you scoundrels coming over and pestering me all day.”

“It’s funny, you mentioning that,” Will said casually from his position behind her. He was pacing around the room now, idly picking up their few possessions and turning them over in his dirty hands as his lips smacked around his apple. “Marie and me were just talking about that. Sounds to me like Marie has some reservations about leaving the gang.”

Amelia stirred the fire and added another of their precious few logs to the embers. “It may not be any proper way to live, but the gang has been our family’s business since we were both little girls. It would be odd if she felt nothing about leaving it.”

“Maybe she doesn’t really think it’s right for her to leave. Maybe a lot of people think that.”

“Hah!” Amelia scoffed, looking at Will with scorn. “And what kind of future do you think that will be for her, Will? What’s she going to do? Run a criminal empire from a mouldy, rat-infested flat in London? Grow old? Marry a no-good thief like you?”

Amelia was shocked to see colour rush to the cheeks of the hardened thief. He looked away, sucking his lower lip, and for the first time, Amelia recognised the unique charm she had always heard Will possessed but had never seen. “It doesn’t have to be as ridiculous as that, you know,” he muttered.

She felt a pang of guilt at this reaction. *It’s always been understood Will and Marie would marry someday,* Amelia thought sombrely. *I thought Father made it clear that was no longer going to be the case now that Marie is leaving the gang. Scoundrel or not, Will doesn’t deserve to have his heart broken, if such a thing is even possible.*

“Will,” she said, a bit more gently, as she hefted the iron cook pot from the floor beside her onto the fire. “If you really do care about Marie, you should be happy she has the opportunity to live a life in some kind of safety.”

“You mean a life that’s *comfortable*.” From his mouth the word sounded like a bitter invective.

“And what’s wrong with that? Marie’s told me about all the fancy balls she’s been sent to on gang business, all the wealth and luxury she sees paraded about by nobles like our friend downstairs. Is it so wrong that she should want to be a part of that world instead of skulking down alleyways doing the gang’s bloody work?”

“What, she’s going to get rich selling needlework to pompous noblemen?”

Her chore forgotten, Amelia was now standing with arms akimbo, her voice raised in a shout. “Not necessarily…but she might find a rich man to marry her if she isn’t running around like a criminal. Have you ever thought of that?”

Will spat on the floor in disgust. “Hell with that. At least now, she works for herself. It’s not pretty work, but it’s honest. What you’re talking is no different than the whores who sell themselves on the streets of—”

“Not another word!”

Taking a long wooden spoon from its place by the cooking pot, Amelia waggled it towards Will with menace in her eyes. “She’s leaving that gang, Will Carpenter, and soon. You won’t interfere if you know what’s good for you.”

Will nodded lightly, tongue playing at the inside of his cheek, then dropped his apple core on the floor and walked back out the door, slamming it behind him without saying another word.

Amelia breathed out a quiet scream of exasperation, stomped her foot, then turned back to her fire. She had better things to do than waste her time on fragile male ambition.

Chapter 5

A Village of Thieves

“I still think it’s a mistake, Marie.”

“Mrrf dnnf yff,” answered Marie with a scowl, her mouth still half-full of the last of the days-old loaf of bread.

“I can see spending time with the gang has done wonders for your table manners…to say nothing of your conversation skills,” Amelia muttered, stirring the pot that still lingered on the fire. “I hope the eligible bachelors of Gower’s Grove are ready for you.”

Marie swallowed the final crumbs, feeling them scrape her throat like grains of sand, then gasped, “I don’t recall asking for your advice on how to win a husband, little sister. But putting that aside, I don’t think we have any other choice, do we?”

“Leave him here with me,” said Amelia blithely.

Marie shook her head with a grim expression. “Not after he already tried to escape. He may well try again, and you don’t have a chance of stopping him if he does.”

“You mean he might come up behind me and pin me to the floor in a most embarrassing position?”

Marie chose to ignore the jibe. “Or worse. And yes, he nearly got away from me. Do you really think you have a better chance of stopping him?”

Amelia tapped her chin in thought. “Why don’t you just wait to open the house until Father gets back, then? That way, he and more of the gang can be here to watch him.”

“Father’s already hours later than he said he would be. What if he’s delayed even further? The village can hardly afford to go another day with the house closed.” Marie sighed. “I tell you, there’s nothing else for it. I’ll be careful, Ammy. You know I will. And it’s not as though I’ll be alone out there. If you told me true, the whole village will be watching out with me.”

Amelia gave a grunt of frustration and turned back to stir the stew, trying to ignore the growl of her stomach that arose with the delicious brown smell. “I still think it’s a mistake, Marie.”

“So do I.” Marie wiped her mouth on the back of her sleeve and rose from the table, straightening her man’s shirt.

“But I don’t think we have any other choice.”

* * *

Even from her place behind him, Marie could see Benedict’s eyes rove

everywhere around them the second they walked out the door and onto the street. Oh, he was clever enough about it, with his expression neutral, his gaze never lingering too long on any one thing, but she could detect the seconds of care he devoted to examining each rock and tree and run-down house they passed, looking for some way to facilitate another escape attempt.

"It's no good you trying out here, you know," Marie said to him in a loud, cheery voice. She kept one hand on the butt of her knife, right beside the ring of keys that bounced and jingled on her belt.

When he turned to look at her with an expression somewhere between confused and hurt, she explained, "Even if you managed to get away from me, you wouldn't make it a mile before you were caught and dragged back here." Benedict could not muster anything more than a sickly twist of his lips and a nod to this counsel, then turned his eyes forward and continued walking.

At least, I certainly hope that's true, she thought but did not say. Just in case, she wrapped the long end of the rope tighter around her left hand, pulling Benedict that much closer to her. He rubbed his wrists together at the friction. The rope she held was tied to his bindings, which had surely made them even tighter than before. Marie wanted to feel good about that, remembering their battle inside her family's house…though she felt something more complicated when the memory of that kiss from a few hours ago came roaring back.

"Where exactly are we going, Miss Devons?" Benedict asked over his shoulder, pausing and looking around them in apparent confusion. They had walked down the hill from Marie's family's home and into the centre of Gower's Grove. The seaside was more clearly in view now, and the calls of the gulls and salt in the air energised Marie on their march.

The houses had grown closer together if no less dilapidated, and for the first time, they saw people approaching them from the centre of town. She noted Benedict peering at the empty houses, most of which had grown over with weeds and vines; the abandoned ruins of family homes seemed to multiply every time she returned home from the city.

Marie shook her head at his question and gestured forward. “Up the road a bit further. Not more than another few minutes.”

But Benedict simply stood there now. His shoulders were stooped, his face a mask of pain. “Keep walking,” Marie said, a bit more sternly.

Still, Benedict did not move. “I’m weary, though,” he protested in an increasingly loud voice, his eyes roving to the two people who were walking down the small village road in their direction. “You know, from sitting in that *cellar* for hours with this *rope* tied around me.”

“You’re fatigued from sitting around all day?” Marie tsked. “You nobles are even more delicate than I thought. Come on, get moving.” She gave him a small push with her free hand, and Benedict flew to the ground dramatically as though bowled over by a hurricane.

“Ouch!” he yelped. She could see his eyes were on the women who had drawn quite close to them by now, as if gauging their reaction. “Tied and beaten—oh, have mercy, Miss Devons!”

Marie smiled as Benedict watched the women come right up to them. Each was an old woman bent nearly in half and bearing a load of laundry fresh from the river.

“Good morning, Marie,” said the stooped old women sweetly in one voice, stepping around Benedict to greet Marie as though he were a sack of rubbish left in the street.

“Good morning, Missus Rowles. Missus Potley, how is your granddaughter feeling today? Is she any better?”

The fatter of the women nodded enthusiastically, taking Marie’s hand in hers and patting the back of her hand amiably. “Yes, Charlotte is doing very well today, all thanks to you. Her cough is almost all gone, just like that!”

Marie beamed and patted the old woman right back. “Oh, I’m so glad to hear that. You take care of her…and yourself, too, Missus Potley. That goes for you as well, Missus Rowles.”

“Thank you, Marie!” the women chorused as they continued to toddle off down the dirt road, giggling with one another like a pair of schoolgirls.

“Give our regards to your father, won’t you?” called Missus Rowles.

“Curing a little girl’s cough? I didn’t realise you were a doctor as well as a kidnapper,” grumbled Benedict from his place in the mud.

“From what I can see, you’re more in need of a laundress,” Marie answered snidely. “Get up. Not much further now.”

This time he complied, looking down at the muddy front of his garments with mild interest. Marie pushed him once again—harder, this time—and he stumbled forward.

Sure enough, it was only another five minutes until they reached the centre of Gower's Grove. The village was too small to truly bustle, Marie thought, and she did not like how it seemed ever smaller and poorer every time she returned from London. Still, as always, she was filled with a rush of joy at the familiar sights. It was the same old faces, the same old buildings as ever—the place hadn't fallen down in her absence as she so frequently feared.

"You have to help me," Benedict said in a stage whisper to a passer-by, a middle-aged man with a long grey moustache.

"Eh, is that you, Marie? I heard you were back," said the old man gruffly as he approached Marie, walking past Benedict as though he hadn't heard him.

Marie stifled a frustrated sigh. "Hello, Mister Keller. How is your flock?"

As expected, Mister Keller hooked his thumbs in his trousers and took in a deep breath. "Oh, it's right terrible, I'm afraid, just awful. Of course, it's not so bad these days thanks to you lot, but it's been a dry year, and without the rain, y'see, the grass just won't do for sheep, especially the ones that…" Marie forced herself to keep smiling, though she knew she would be here for a while yet.

As she politely continued her one-sided conversation with Mister Keller, out of the corner of her eye she spied Benedict calling to a trio

of young boys. “Psst! You there, boys!” he hissed, and the boys walked over with sceptical looks on their dirty faces. She watched them as Mister Keller continued droning on about the latest goings-on with his flock.

“I’ve ten pounds for whichever of you can get me loose from these ropes,” Benedict whispered. He gestured to his bonds, then toward Marie, and then mimed something to show the importance of keeping quiet.

“Ten pounds!” one of the boys cried in amazement. For this outburst, he was roughly clubbed on the head by the fist of one of the taller boys.

“Leave it, Peter. Don’t you see who he’s with?”

Marie smiled as the three boys rushed over, mercifully interrupting Mister Keller’s oration about his old ewe’s case of blackleg. “What’s the matter?” she asked them, bending over to look at them at their own eye level.

“Miss, that man was trying to get us to help him get away from you,” said the tall boy, his cap held between his hands politely.

“He was going to give us ten pounds!” squeaked Peter.

Marie shot a glare at Benedict, who could only wilt haplessly in response. “Thank you, boys,” she said, turning to face them with a warm smile on her face. “Come by the storehouse later, and I’ll see if I can find a sweetie for each of you.”

The boys ran off, whooping in celebration at this promise. After giving a passing excuse to Mister Keller, Marie pushed Benedict by the shoulder to prompt him to keep moving.

The man complied, but slowly. “What manner of place have you brought me to?” Benedict muttered, blinking in confusion as he looked around them. His voice rising in volume, he asked more toward the passers-by than to Marie, “Can’t these people see I’ve been kidnapped? Why don’t they do something about it?”

Marie only smiled and shook her head at these questions, which drew no response at all from the villagers around them. “That building right there,” she said, pointing to a round building in the middle of the village.

The Duke’s son grumbled and shook his head in bewilderment, but he complied with his captor’s orders. Drawing a long iron key from the ring on her belt, Marie unlocked the door, grunted as she pushed it open, and ushered Benedict into the darkness of the storehouse.

Marie sighed at the sight that awaited her. It was immediately evident there was much work to do in the wide room, only dimly lit by the daylight that flooded in behind them. There were sacks of flour and bolts of cloth piled everywhere, turnips tumbling out of overfull sacks and lumber that had been propped upright by the door instead of in their proper places in the adjoining storerooms.

“Right,” she said, steeling herself for the difficult task at hand. “Over there by the wall. I’ll have you in sight while we’re here, and I won’t take any more of your tricks.”

“Or what?” Benedict asked brashly. “You’ll run me through? If you’d meant to use that knife on me, you would have done it before now. Though I suppose I could use a shave, if you—*ouch!*”

“Oh, hush, I barely scratched you,” Marie said with a bitter chuckle, pushing him toward a wall. It was true, she had only brushed the edge of the knife against his rear end to silence him, though she could not fully restrain a strange pang of guilt at the action.

“Besides,” she said, tying the end of his rope tightly to a post by the wall. “My friends in this village would be far more eager to convince you to cease your complaining, as you’ve already seen.”

“I ask you again, Marie Devons, what kind of place is this?” Benedict asked, voice straining with confusion and fear. “A village of thieves, is it?”

But there was too much that needed doing for Marie to bother to answer him. She started by throwing open the shutters, revealing all the clutter that clustered on the stone floor and hung from the plain wooden ceiling of the Devons’ storehouse.

This task accomplished, she compared the goods scattered across the floor to the contents of the handwritten list kept in a chest by the door, then began hauling things to their proper places. Boxes of nails, bolts of linen, barrels of vegetables—all of it she carefully inspected, inventoried, and stored. All the while, she felt Benedict’s eyes follow her back and forth across the room.

“I’ve never known a gang of thieves to expend their time and energy

stealing such commonplace items," he said softly after Marie had been at her task for nearly an hour.

Marie replied before she could think better of it. "It should come as no surprise that you know nothing at all when it comes to gangs, my lord. Everything here was purchased by my father and the gang, not stolen."

"Purchased with other people's money."

She shot him a look. The man was bound to the wall, filthy from his capture and surely sore from his bonds and his recent blows to the head. Yet Benedict sat there staring at her with all the confidence and self-assuredness of a cat. "Some of it, yes," she grumbled. "But not to enrich ourselves. Even that should be clear to a wealthy fop like Your Lordship."

"It may not be gold and jewels, but this storehouse seems rich enough to my eyes. But for what purpose, Miss Devons?"

"None of your business," she snapped.

"Ordinarily, I would agree, but seeing as I have become the latest of your gang's ill-gotten gains, I must disagree. What is your gang playing at, Marie?"

Why are you wasting your time on him? Marie asked herself, frustrated with having answered him in the first place. *It's not as though you need his approval for what you do—you know the gang is only doing what must be done.*

Benedict had raised his voice in another biting question when Marie found herself rescued from the conversation by the quiet appearance in the doorway of a bent old women and two young children. They were familiar faces to Marie, though looking at them in Benedict's presence, she was stricken by how thin and sallow all three of them appeared.

"Hello, Miss Marie," said the old woman warmly, ushering her quiet children into the storehouse before her.

"Hello, Missus Applegate. It's good to see you again."

The old woman stepped close and pinched Marie's cheek affectionately, her toothless smile full of fun and mischief. "You've been away too long, girl. London is no place for you."

For several minutes the two women caught up on the latest news of Gower's Grove while the children stared at Benedict in wordless fascination. Eventually, Missus Applegate related the reason for their visit to the storehouse, and Marie dragged out a flour sack from one of the back rooms.

"I say, you're growing up to be strapping young things, aren't you?" Marie laughed as the children struggled to carry the sack between them. She managed to coax a giggle from them with this question, and after a warm wave of thanks and farewells, the woman and children were off on their way.

Marie carefully noted this transaction in her records, then she shot a

look in Benedict's direction, hoping to forestall some cutting remark or witticism. None came. Instead, he simply looked in her direction, a look of concentration hanging on his sculpted brow.

Another petitioner came to the door, then another. Marie greeted each of them genially, asking after the health of their families and listening soberly to their requests, then sent them off with whatever it was they were in need of.

Before long, she saw that the sun had swung across the sky and now painted the storehouse in streaks of golden yellow and orange. She gave herself a moment of respite, sitting on a rough wooden stool by the door and wiping the sheen of perspiration from her forehead with a faded handkerchief she took from her trouser pocket.

"They're all of them in the Devons' gang, then, are they? That's why none of them will help me, it must be." Marie looked over to him, having almost forgotten the man was still there thanks to his uncharacteristic quiet. Benedict looked baffled, as though he could not believe the very words he was saying. "The whole bloody village—women, children, the elderly—they are all part of the robbing and kidnapping?"

Marie did not bother to look over to Benedict as she answered, "No. Only a few of the gang live here in the village, and none have been here today."

"Then why—"

"Because the gang keeps this village alive, my lord." Marie was surprised to hear how angry she sounded, looking over at her prisoner with contempt. "When your ransom is delivered, it will purchase all

we need to fill this storehouse to the rafters, will help support all these people for months, maybe longer."

"Ah, then that's how the game is played?" Benedict had a look of triumph on his face. "Your gang is only too happy to sell your goods to these poor villagers. They get what they need, and you line your pockets. And if they can't pay, then I'm sure that's when that little book you keep writing in comes—"

"We don't sell these things to them!" Marie interrupted. "We give them to those in need."

Benedict scoffed. "Out of the goodness of your hearts, I'm sure."

"As a matter of fact, yes. These are our countrymen, our friends and families."

"You expect me to believe that your gang just gives away all these goods?"

"Yes! It's the truth, after all."

Bracing herself for another dismissive refutation from Benedict, Marie was surprised to see his face contort in shock instead. He seemed to search for words, his cheeks flushing.

"That…that is no way for a village to be run," he muttered at last. "These people don't need to profit from your crimes. They've sheep in

their fields, it sounds like, and strength in their bodies. They can work to sustain themselves, the same as any other good Briton…only they don't need to anymore."

"You haven't the slightest idea what you're talking about. The gang is all that's keeping us alive. We could work our fingers to the bone, and with what's holding us back, all those people wouldn't live to see the next winter." Marie absentmindedly saw that her fingers were clutching the handle of her knife. She made herself release it, trying not to let her righteous indignation take over her good sense.

"As far as I can see, the only thing holding them back from a better way of life is your gang and its 'charity'."

"The very fact that you think this is something to argue, shows that you can't bloody well see past your own stomach! Our village wouldn't be in the position we were in if not for you and that wicked Duke father of yours!"

He frowned. "What the devil are you talking about?"

A wicked smile came to Marie's lips, and she drew herself closer to him, looking down at his handsome face with scorn. "You don't even know, do you? Gower's Grove is—"

"That'll do now, Marie."

Her heart froze in her chest as Marie turned to see her father and Will stride through the door. Mark looked around the storehouse, nodding approvingly.

“Seems you’ve done all right here, love,” said Mark, scratching his whiskers idly. “Our little lord is still in here and still in one piece. Not sure I’d have been so gentle if it’d been me.”

Marie nodded, feeling herself blush terribly as she briskly stepped away from Benedict. “He certainly didn’t make it easy.”

“Still, no harm done. Not to us, anyway. How about around here? Everyone get what they need?”

“Not yet. I wasn’t able to open it up until but a few hours ago, and I haven’t seen Simon’s family or Father Green. Might be we’ll need to stay for a few more hours today.”

Mark looked Benedict up and down carefully, then put his hands on his daughter’s shoulders warmly. “Such a good heart, Marie. Just like Lily.” He sighed heavily, a tear wetting his pudgy cheek. “Your mother was too good for us. God rest her soul. I’ll stay here a while. You get something to eat and change out of those dirty clothes.”

Marie shot a look to Benedict, who looked on with a dark expression colouring his charming features. “Are you sure? I don’t mind—”

“I am.” He nodded to Will, who stood leaning against the wall with his arms folded. “Walk her home, won’t you, lad? I need to have a bit of a chat with our friend here, anyway.”

Though just a moment ago she had been terribly angry with the nobleman, suddenly Marie felt reluctant to leave. Hands clutched together tightly in front of her, she opened her mouth to protest but was interrupted by Benedict.

"Go on, Miss Devons," he said in a strange tone of voice. "You're likely tired from listening to my fool voice all day. Your father and I will talk."

She bristled at being spoken to in such a patronising way, but eventually, Marie relented, walking away after giving one last strangely emotional look in Benedict's direction.

"Amelia told us he almost escaped once," Will said in a voice as cold and hard as stone as they walked through the golden light of afternoon through the village roads. "It was a foolish thing taking him with you to the storehouse, Marie, but brave. I'd have probably done the same thing."

Marie snorted. Those were kind words from Will, but she strangely found she had no patience for his affections today. "Thanks."

I hope Father doesn't mean to hurt him, she thought sombrely. *He may be a fool and a braggart, but he could have hurt me and didn't do so. He doesn't seem as deserving of ill-treatment as Eggleston and the rest.* So absorbed was Marie with the memory of the look of courage on Benedict's face just a moment before—the same face she had kissed not long before, she remembered with a blush—that she tripped over a clod of dirt and nearly fell sprawling on the road.

"Of course, that don't explain why you're spending so much time arguing with him," said Will casually. She could feel him give her a

sidelong look with these words. “He’s our captive, Marie, and bound to be gone within a day or so. You really think he deserves this much attention from you?”

Marie sighed, hoping to push away the blush that she felt heat her cheeks. “I’m too tired to think, Will. At least, about anything but that stew, assuming Amelia ever managed to finish it.” The pair shared a comradely chuckle as the storehouse faded over the narrow village horizon behind them.

Chapter 6

A Gentleman's Challenge

"Now then, my lord," grunted Mark Devons as he pulled the crude wooden stool in front of Benedict. He sat on it with a heavy sigh, wiping away the stray tear from the corner of his eye. "Or do you prefer just 'Benedict'? I've heard tell you don't much care for titles and fancy society."

"You can call me whatever you damn well please, Mister Devons," Benedict grunted. "I'm your captive, aren't I? I'm hardly in any position to stop you." He rubbed his sore wrists together at the thought, flexing his fingers and wondering if they had turned purple by now.

The man outstretched his hands and shrugged casually. Benedict examined him closely—with his rough beard, lined brow, and thinning grey hair, Mark bore little resemblance to his daughter. He was a rotund sort, wearing a long, tattered coat and shoes that were stained by mud but showed relatively little wear on the heel, Benedict noted. *Not a man of labour, then, but a man of drink. I shall have to remember that.*

"Suit yourself. I suppose it doesn't make much difference. Lord or layabout, you're our prisoner either way."

Anger flared in Benedict's breast. "You can't keep me here like this, you know."

Mark pursed his lips and sucked at his teeth, his lip twitching as if fighting a droll smile. “Oh, I dunno about that. Looks to me that you’re pretty well kept at the moment.”

“I’ve done no harm to you or yours. Let me go, and this will all be forgotten. I give you my word.”

“I’m afraid that’s not possible.” The words were as easy and straightforward as if he had said the sky is blue.

“You know who my father is.” Benedict leaned forward, hoping to look as menacing as possible from his position seated on the hard stone floor. “Do you really think there’s any way he’ll let you go after abducting his only son? The man will have the whole army looking for me by now, and as soon as they release me, they’ll burn this entire village to the ground.”

If Benedict had hoped for a reaction of fear, he was sorely disappointed when the gang leader instead erupted in loud, booming laughter. Benedict drew in a breath, caught off guard. The expression on Mark’s face, that glittering smirk of wit and amusement…Benedict had seen the same look on Marie’s face earlier that day. The threat of violence notwithstanding, all of a sudden, Benedict found himself missing the girl’s company. *She’s much more comely than her father, even if she is evidently equally vicious…*

“You don’t know where you are, do you, my lord?” asked Mark, wiping away a tear of mirth.

Benedict raised his chin in defiance. “Gower’s Grove. A poor village

not more than a few hours' ride from London."

A flicker of darkness passed before Mark's eyes, but then it was gone. "Do you know whose land this village is built on? What lord lays right to all the people and buildings and activities you've seen today?"

Benedict hesitated, and that was all the opportunity Mark needed. "This is Preston land, lad. Your father's."

My God. Benedict swallowed, trying to make some sense of this development. "This…this is some sort of revolt, then? You mean to coerce something beyond money from my father?"

Mark chuckled humourlessly and grunted as he lifted himself to his feet. He looked down at Benedict with contempt plain on his face, then began to slowly pace toward the window and gaze out at the town. "We didn't know who you were. Not at first. But that made it all the sweeter, to tell you the truth. A little lord's ransom's a fine thing; taking it from the pocket of a bastard like the Duke of Preston isn't something we could pass up."

"What do you have against my father?" Benedict protested. "How has he harmed you?"

Mark spat something yellow onto the floor at Benedict's feet. "Bloody Duke never cared much for us, nor any of the little villages here on the coast. Except to take his taxes, of course.

His father was the same. But where was the twice-damned Duke of Preston when his own people needed help with the summer fires a few

years ago? Or the sickness after that? Or any of the bloody pirates who keep taking what little we can fish out of our waters? Or *now*, when the crops have failed so utterly we can't even feed ourselves?"

Benedict held his tongue. He had no answer for these questions.

The older man sighed, looking as though he bore a great weight on his shoulders. "We pleaded with the magistrate, lad. We even sent a man to London ourselves to beg for the Duke's help. Poor Simon came back after a month with empty hands and a back cut to ribbons. Seems your father put him off every day, then finally told his servants to give Simon a whipping for daring to bother him."

Mark shook his head sadly. "It's been terrible like that ever since we heard the Duke's wife died. Talk around London is that all the man does is sit alone in his mansion and drink. Meanwhile, folks all along the coast are starving or worse. I've had friends who wanted no part of what the gang has brought to the village. They kept their honour, their dignity—it made for mighty poor sustenance after they finished their last crumb of bread. You've seen the village, lad. You know how few of us are left by now."

"But to turn to banditry…" Benedict stammered, his mouth feeling dry as sand. "It's not right, Mister Devons, no matter your reasons. The people you've harmed, even if it's to help your village…."

Mark fixed Benedict with a look that cut him to the bone. "Think what you like of us, my lord. Death has been looking in our windows for a while now. I'd do anything to keep my family alive for another day, and if that means turning to the life of a thief, I've no regrets about doing what needs to be done. Can you tell me you wouldn't do the same for the ones you love?"

Benedict looked away, feeling hot tears come to his eyes.

I'd always heard talk about the poor, but it had felt so unimportant, so distant, like someone else's problem or a fairy tale I no longer believed in. He swallowed hard. *Has my family truly been responsible for bringing such ruin to this village? To people who have been counting on us to take care of them in return for taking the fruits of their labours? And now they must turn to a gang just to survive, all thanks to us.*

He had been dimly aware that some villages were under the control of his family, and that they were the source of his wealth, but they had never been anything more than names or numbers in books of accounts.

I didn't know. I had no idea. But this thought he immediately dismissed as trivial, self-serving. Whether he knew it or not, these people had been counting on him and his father, and they had abandoned their duties in their own selfish wallowing.

But then he remembered the book that Marie had been recording everyone's names in, and his expression hardened. "I don't know just what you and your fellows have been going through, Mister Devons," Benedict said in a voice full of acid. "I'm sure life is hard out here on the coast. But I don't think you and your gang are the good Samaritans you claim to be."

Mark turned back from the window with thunder rumbling in his chest. "How's that, now?" he growled, stepping closer to Benedict.

"Well, it's not as though you don't get anything out of your life of crime, is it? You have a whole village of accomplices here at your

beck and call, ready at a moment's notice to conceal your crimes or give you a place to hide. All you need to do is share a bit of what you've stolen, and you have a conspiracy to cover up any felony you commit. And I'm sure a little show of force from the gang is enough to keep anyone from thinking about giving up the game."

"Here, you'd better stop that kind of talk," Mark snarled with a finger shaken down in Benedict's face.

With a tremendous push, his limbs shaking at the effort, Benedict leaned against the wall and got to his feet. The rope that connected his bonds to the post by the wall was pulled taut, and his wrists screamed at the tension, but Benedict looked the thief in the eye with all the grit he could summon.

"You may have a lot of high-flown talk about helping the village, Mark Devons, but I say you're nothing more than a bunch of lowlife thugs. I don't think you do anything at all for this village. Not really. You're more concerned with your own interests."

"Is that so?" asked Mark in a voice that was alarmingly quiet. "Would you stake your word on that?"

Benedict drew himself as tall as he could, ignoring the pain that shot through his limbs. "I'd stake my life on it."

Mark gave a strange, menacing chuckle at this. He turned away, rubbing his chin, then looked back at Benedict with fire in his eyes. "You're a betting man, my lord. Care to make a wager on it?"

“What do you mean?”

“Your father replied to the ransom note. He indicated it would be some days until he could assemble the ransom and deliver it. Way I see it, that gives you a little time to see just what the gang does, whether we’re ruffians and killers or we actually help Gower’s Grove as I told you.”

Benedict blinked, still focused on the news that his father had agreed to pay to free him. Something about it felt strangely wrong to him, knowing that his father was quick to spend a large amount of money on his son but would not bestir himself to save his people’s lives. *That’s just Devons’ lies, you fool, don’t go buying all his talk.*

“Follow along with us until then,” Mark said, his lips flushed with excitement, hands trembling. “Help us do our work for a few days. You’ll see that we’re the only ones keeping this village alive. If you still think as ill of us, I swear to you that I’ll disband the gang.”

“Aha!” Benedict said excitedly, feeling sure he had gained the upper hand in this encounter. “Willing to give it all up just to impress the likes of me? You must be eager to get out of the life of a thief before the law catches up with you. Perhaps you’re even angling to be granted clemency if you treat your captive well enough?”

Mark Devons fixed Benedict with a piercing gaze from his keen grey eyes. “I don’t care about such things for myself,” he said softly. “But as necessary as our work is…yes, I’d rather my daughters don’t end up giving up their lives at the end of the headman’s axe. Despite where you come from, you seem an honest sort, and to be honest in return, getting the Duke’s son to see just what’s going on around here might be our best hope for saving ourselves. Now that we know you’re not just the usual empty-headed sort of noble, at least.”

“I…” Benedict shook his head, stunned by this proposition. “You can’t really mean for me to help you in your deeds.”

“Why not?” Mark laughed, punching Benedict genially in the shoulder. “You’re a strong lad, I can see that. We could use your help, and it’s nothing too complicated, even for a milksop son of a duke like you.”

Benedict struggled not to wince at the man’s rough physical touch. “I won’t do it. Kidnapping, murder, extortion…it’s wrong, Devons, and I won’t help you.”

“That’s what *you* think, remember.” Mark waved a hand dismissively. “I tell you, we do nothing of the sort. Oh, our business gets a little unsavoury, maybe, but all you’ll be doing is what you’ve seen with Marie today in the storehouse. Helping little old ladies feed their poor little children. You can’t tell me you have any objection to that besides an aversion to honest work?”

“And what happens if you deem my work insufficient?”

With a roguish smile, Mark answered, “I’ll triple the ransom I’m asking your father for. So no slacking off on the job, eh?”

Benedict bit his lower lip and studied the floor, hoping to find some sense beneath him. *This is folly. I can’t even be entertaining this kind of nonsense, can I? What am I going to do, run about in the streets with a knife, robbing my peers?*

Yet he couldn't deny that the challenge held its own appeal, strange though it was. Benedict had always had a warm place in his heart for outcasts and iconoclasts—his misadventures in the London streets with Long Robin and his ilk were proof enough of that—and from all he could see, Devons appeared to be a rascal of the most romantic sort.

If nothing else, if he is somehow an honest man, then this will mean the end of his gang, Benedict reasoned. *And if he's telling the truth, then I owe it to these people to see that with my own eyes. They've been ignored by their lord for too long.*

And of course, agreeing to this mad proposition would mean having the chance to spend more time around the bizarrely compelling Marie….

"You give your word that you won't ask me to harm anyone?" Benedict asked, his voice creaking. "And that you'll truly break up your gang when I tell you I've seen enough?"

Mark raised a hand in a pose of solemnity. "On my very honour, I'll not have you harm the hairs on a spider's head. And if you're even half as upstanding as you pretend, there'll be no need for the gang any longer."

Benedict snorted despite himself. "How can I trust the word of a gang leader?"

"The same way I trust the word of the son of a no-good noble." Mark winked. "Ignoring all my instincts and trusting in my continued good luck."

A long moment passed before Benedict finally sighed. “All right.” His breath rattled in his throat. His head was full of air and confusion. “You have a deal, Mister Devons. I’ll play along with your gang, at least until my freedom is bought.”

Benedict cried out, seeing a flash of metal in Mark’s hand dart forward at him. But before he could utter a word of protest, Benedict found that his bonds had been severed, and a smirk graced the thief’s face.

“Try not to take it so seriously, lad,” said Mark, extending a dirty hand invitingly. “It’s only your life. Are you really so concerned about something as worthless as that?”

Unable to help himself from sharing a smile, Benedict grabbed the man’s hand and shook it vigorously. “Not half as much as I should be.”

* * *

Benedict hadn’t quite believed Devons when the man told him over a bowl of stew that he was free to roam the village as he pleased. “After all,” the old scoundrel had laughed, “you’ve given me your word, and I’ll at least pretend that’s good enough for me! Just make sure to get back here before dark. A village of thieves is a dangerous place at night.”

He chuckled at the thought, stretching his arms as he sauntered up a nearby hill. *Might be good to get a look at the surrounding countryside, if nothing else.*

When he reached the hill's summit, he drew in a quick breath at the sight before him. Past a few green hills that rolled past darkened houses, there was the seaside, painted in brilliant rosy gold by the sunset behind his back. It was as though he were looking at the very edge of the world.

Tearing his eyes away from the beautiful landscape, Benedict saw that he was not alone on this hillside. Not fifty yards away, he saw a woman sitting on the grass and staring out at the sea. She wore a simple but lovely dress, and even from his distance, it was clear she was a beautiful, full-figured young woman. It wasn't until he saw a mass of luscious black curls wafting in the breeze that he realised he was looking at Marie.

But there was something else, he saw; something was odd about her appearance. *Now that I see her wearing a dress instead of men's garments, she looks somehow familiar to me. In fact, she almost looks like…*

"You!" he blurted. Marie shot him a look, her rosy lips parted in surprise. For an instant, Benedict felt his wits fly away in the wind, stricken with the feeling that he had never beheld as pretty a sight in all his life.

At last, he continued with a laugh and a rueful rub of the back of his head, "That is, I…we've seen one another before, haven't we? Before all this, I mean."

Amusement danced in Marie's eyes. Benedict somehow thought she was going to gesture for him to sit beside her on that inviting patch of grass on the hillside, but instead, she only said, "I don't think you and I move in the same circles, Lord Elebury."

“Benedict.” She gave him a curious look, and he explained, “I…don’t think I should really be called by that name whilst I’m here.”

Marie inclined her head slightly. “Benedict, then.”

Deciding to forego an invitation, Benedict sat down beside Marie. “And I don’t know if I’d agree. There’s Merrick’s, for one. And I’m quite sure I saw you at a ball, earlier in the day…Good God, was that really yesterday?” He laughed and shook his head. “I suppose it must have been. I can’t recall the name, but it was a public ball.”

“On Wester Street, wasn’t it?” Marie gave a tired yet still musical laugh. “I can’t remember the name of the lord, either. They all tend to sound the same after a while.”

“How strange that our paths crossed several times on the same day,” Benedict chuckled. “If I recall correctly, when I saw you at that ball you were dressed in quite a different manner.”

Marie shifted positions slightly, crossing her legs away from him but not taking her gaze away from the scenery below. “Yes, I…I was there on business, as it happens.”

Benedict felt a chill pass between them. “Business for the gang.” It was a statement rather than a question.

“Yes.”

The sea in front of them darkened another shade, looking closer to ink than the liquid gold it had seemed a moment ago. A few gulls cried their last strangled calls as they wheeled off to wherever birds go at night.

"Why didn't you tell me that we were on my father's land? That the misfortune that has befallen the village is because of my family's inaction?" Benedict asked.

Marie blew out a long, heavy sigh. "I have never heard anything about the Duke of Prescott that wasn't followed by a curse. I know he did nothing to help my family when my mother fell in the great sickness, and my whole life I've been told it's always been thus. Is it so strange that I should expect you to be no different than all the other dukes?"

"If you knew my father personally, as I do…" Benedict muttered. He waited for Marie to look in his direction before smiling sardonically. "Then you would be even less surprised at his callousness."

She laughed at this, suddenly and powerfully, her body shaking with the effort. As the sun winked out of sight and the stars peeked out from the dark firmament above and the rippling reflections below, their voices joined in laughter that rang out over the edge of the world, bitter and worldly and marvellous.

Just then, it struck Benedict like a bolt from above that he had not been followed to this place by that flickering sensation of something being wrong—had not been visited by it, in fact, since he first clapped eyes on Marie at Merrick's. Something was different now, he knew, different from how it had been for as long as he could remember. At once, this knowledge was liberating and utterly terrifying.

“Whatever the next days bring, Marie,” Benedict said softly into the wind after catching his breath, “I count myself fortunate that our paths happened to cross more than once.”

Chapter 7

Honest Work

Marie woke from a pleasant dream she could not remember, stretching as she climbed from her bed and pushed open the shutters to greet the sunlight.

I cannot remember the last time I rested quite so well, she thought with a smile. A pleasant, comfortable sensation hung over her like a beam of sunlight, and Marie found herself humming an old tune to herself as she fairly floated through preparing herself for the day.

All that lasted only as long as it took Marie to dress herself in her man's shirt and trousers and descend the stairs to the main living room of the little old house. The cheery squeak of the floorboards under her leisurely steps halted abruptly, her breath catching in her throat when she saw her father seated beside Benedict at the table. The remains of a hearty breakfast were strewn in front of them, and Mark slapped Benedict on the shoulder as he laughed heartily. Both of Benedict's hands were unbound and resting on the table. Marie felt her heart race as she saw a handful of forks and knives in easy reach. *He was free enough last evening, I suppose, but then, I was armed, and he did not have a weapon at hand…*

"Good morning, love," chirped Mark. From the glow on his cheeks and smile on his face, Marie could tell he had already been at the bottle or else was still drunk from the night before.

"Is this really wise?" she asked as she carefully approached the table.

Mark laughed. “What, breakfast?”

“I find it’s generally unwise to *avoid* breakfast, myself. As you may be able to tell,” quipped Benedict as he patted his stomach. This jape earned a roar of laughter and another punch in the arm from Mark.

Marie looked back into the kitchen and met her sister’s eyes. Amelia gave an exaggerated shrug and rolled her eyes, then returned to cleaning up.

Marie helped herself to an apple and took a seat at the table, and when her father fell quiet, she said, “You know what I mean, Father. I hope you do, anyway. The man’s tried to escape once already. Do you mean to leave him unbound and pray he keeps his word unlike every other highborn dullard we’ve ever known?”

“Oh, I think so.” Mark dabbed his mouth with a handkerchief, leaving it little cleaner than it had been a moment before. “After all, he’s to come with you on your chores today, and I don’t think you want to bother with hauling a tied-up captive all over town again.”

“I know I certainly don’t,” Benedict said with a smirk. “Besides, it was your idea to carry me around with you on your chores yesterday, wasn’t it?”

Marie scowled at both men and took a vicious bite of her apple. *I still cannot believe Father was so foolish as to make this ridiculous offer to Benedict,* she thought. The previous night had ended in a riotous argument when Mark had told her about his agreement with the

Duke's son—it was obvious to Marie that Benedict would never help them, as he had promised, that he would betray them as all of his ilk always did.

She was not shy about letting her father know this thought. But what was done was done, he said, and Marie knew changing her father's mind once it was made up was as futile as trying to reverse the ebb and flow of the tides.

"I…Father, I don't…I don't think…" Marie stammered, feeling her cheeks grow hot.

Mark silenced her with a gentle pat on the back of her hand. "There there, now. I've all the confidence in the world in you, love, you know that. Just show the man what needs to be done around here, and if he tries to escape, kill him."

At these words, Benedict's smug smirk vanished, replaced in an instant with a look of alarm. "Here now—" he began to protest, and it was all Marie could to not to break into laughter at his reversal in fortune.

"You'll be all right, lad," said Mark, rising from the table and belching. "Just remember our agreement. Marie, love, try not to work the man to death. We're counting on that ransom."

"I'll do my best, though I cannot say the same for him," Marie said, rising from the table and chuckling wickedly.

"Does Father really trust him to work for us?" asked Amelia as she scrubbed a dish clean in the basin.

“Evidently, he does.” Marie’s mouth twisted in reflection at the prospect of spending her day next to this strange nobleman. “Don’t worry, though. Father may have taken leave of his good sense or had it finally washed away with gin, but I haven’t. I’ll keep my knife at hand.”

Amelia reached out a dripping wet hand and grabbed the sleeve of her sister’s shirt. “Just remember our plan. However, it comes out, when his ransom is paid, the village will be well supplied for some time. That’s our time to get you out of the gang for good.”

Marie nodded grimly. “You’re right. That’s the perfect time.”

But as she spoke, she knew her mind was nowhere near her future shopkeeper’s life with Ammy. She was needed here and now, to keep an eye on Benedict. And as she peered out at him through the doorway from the kitchen, her eyes lingering on his broad shoulders and laughing eyes, she had the feeling it would not be a task she would easily forget.

* * *

By midday Marie was pleased to see how correct she was in her estimation of Benedict’s stamina. It was scarcely after noontime when he collapsed onto a low stone wall, asking for a moment’s rest to catch his breath. *The man may be strong enough, and maybe even less of a fool than some of the other nobles I’ve known, but he still doesn’t know what an honest day’s work feels like.*

“A moment, sir, but that’s all you get.” Benedict looked up at her with consternation, and Marie smiled as she playfully tapped the butt of her knife in a wordless reminder of her father’s instructions.

Benedict gestured to the cart that he had been pulling for the previous several hours, a trickle of sweat running down from his sandy blond hair to his high, pointed cheekbone. “We’ve…been dashing from one…house to the other all…morning,” he panted. “Surely we’ve…nearly fed the whole…village by now.”

“We haven’t only been delivering foodstuffs, though I’ll be sure to let Father know how poorly you pay attention to your work.” As she spoke, Marie peered into the cart to inspect what was left to be delivered, then consulted the paper she had brought with them that morning.

“I mean…how many of you…are even in this village…anyway?”

“You’ll catch your breath better if you can keep your mouth shut for more than half a second, you know.” Seeing Benedict would not be much use for a while longer, Marie sighed and uncorked a canteen she had stowed in the back of the cart. She took a deep draught from it, then passed it to Benedict as she sat a few feet away from him on the low old wall.

“Missus Rowles was most impressed with how you patched up her mouse holes,” she said idly, looking out over the rolling yellow-green pastures. “I admit, I wasn’t sure you were cut out for anything more complex than pulling the cart.”

“Good to know I can still surprise hardened criminals with my occasional competence.” Benedict finished the water in the canteen

and laughed bitterly. “Fixing up old ladies’ houses…for a gang of thieves, you do seem to be an awfully domesticated lot.”

“I don’t know why you’re surprised. My father told you as much, and while he may be many things, he’s no liar.”

Marie hopped up off the wall and snatched the empty canteen from Benedict’s hands. “Come on,” she said briskly. “That moment has gone on long enough.”

Benedict groaned in complaint, but he rose and grabbed the poles on either side of the cart with his red and blistered hands.

Marie stopped him with a gesture. “Leave it here.” She pointed to a taller hill a mile or so away. “We need to collect some herbs. Grab the empty pack and follow me.”

Scrambling over mossy hillocks and tripping past ancient stones, it was not long until the fields and meadows stretched out below them as they climbed higher into the hills on the edge of Gower’s Grove. Marie smiled, hearing not a word of complaint from Benedict as they gazed at the patchwork quilt of grasses dotted with old farmhouses beneath. *Maybe he’s finally too out of breath to complain,* she thought with a wry smirk.

“Beautiful,” he said, immediately countering her assumption. “It really is stunning, isn’t it? The countryside that is.”

Sighting a likely clump of vegetation not far off, Marie stepped along the hillside in its direction with her knife in hand. “I certainly think

so," she said without looking back at the man.

"Putting aside my previous whinging…" Benedict said in a voice full of wonder. "Really, I had no idea life in a little village like this could be so…well, so idyllic."

Marie smiled as she used her knife to dig up a spray of lady's mantle. "London may have its charms, but it's remarkable what a bit of fresh air can do for a person, isn't it?" she said.

Benedict breathed in deeply and with great gusto. "It must be wonderful to be exposed to such countryside so often. You're a lucky woman, Marie."

Despite her better sense, Marie could not help but feel flattered by the kind words. In truth, she had only come to appreciate the sights and smells of the country since leaving to go to London, and she often felt she was the only one who ever stopped to notice the beauty that surrounded her home. She felt something warm ripple inside her, suddenly feeling the absence of loneliness that she had grown used to.

Of course, then he had to go and ruin the effect.

"Really," he continued in a light-hearted tone, "of the two of us, I'd say you've had the easier go of things, all said."

Marie set down her pack and shot him a scathing look. The muscles in his legs were flexed attractively, bulging through his fine if dirty trousers, but Marie summoned all her contempt as she asked, "And just what does that mean, pray tell?"

Benedict laughed, sitting on the grass and gazing out at the scenery without taking note of her ire. “I know, it sounds outrageous, but it must be a sweet life. Living out among all this lovely country, taking what you want from unsuspecting travellers and brawling with doltish nobles…It’s terribly romantic, as well.”

“Terribly,” she muttered darkly.

“I know to someone like you, it must seem awfully easy to be a lord,” he continued wistfully. “But really, there were days when I would give anything in the world to live like this instead of suffering day and night in my father’s estate. You have no idea what it’s like, with a mother who died in shame and a father who drinks himself into a rage every night. To say nothing of the travails of polite society—despite what you may have seen in your work, it’s hardly all laughter and dancing and pretty baubles. You have to be strong to get through it, else they tear you apart. Which is why I left to wallow in the gutter instead, you understand.”

Marie stayed crouched in place on the steep hillside, watching Benedict orate the purported hardships of his life. With every word he spoke of feeling less than fulfilled, of disliking having the public eye on his actions, she felt her blood bubble hotter and faster within her.

At last, she sprang to her feet and tramped away, pack in hand. “I’ve never heard such a load of rubbish…” she grumbled, hoping he heard her and at the same time wishing she hadn’t said it.

It was a long while before she heard his footsteps hasten after her through the pounding in her ears. Benedict was almost right next to her at the summit of the hill when she heard him ask, “Did I say

something wrong?"

Marie laughed sardonically. She started to see how close the man was standing to her, and how much taller than her he was, but was too full of wrath to silence herself now, and leaned up toward his face as she spat, "Oh, no, not at all. You're just educating me, my lord, I know that. After all, what would a simple country girl such as I know about how terrible it is to be Lord Elebury, son of the Duke of Preston? Just because I too have no mother and a drunk for a father—"

"Marie, I—"

"And having all the time and money I could ever want to piss away at a gambling table?" Marie erupted with a disgusted noise of mock dismissal. "Only more hardship, obviously. No, I'm lucky that I've had the chance to go without food for days on end, to spend day and night in fear of another gang breaking in and attacking us in the night, or of soldiers dragging us off to hang for our crimes."

Now she felt hot tears spring to her eyes, and her fingers jabbed into the man's chest as she loosed this torrent of grievances that would not be stayed. "To say nothing of how hard, how damnably hard I must work every day of my life. You have to be strong? You don't know what it *is* to be strong, Benedict. Because if I don't keep strong, keep alert, keep working, then I know people I love are going to suffer and die because of my weakness and—what? What the hell are you looking at?"

She sputtered to a stop, the last of her words wafting away on the cool breeze as she saw Benedict staring at her with an inscrutable look on his face. It was clear he was hearing every word she said, and they seemed to affect a sadness within him…but there was something behind those eyes, too.

It was almost as though he was greater, more filled with life, for continuing to look at her. Marie realised she had seen men look at other women like that before. With another shuddering breath, she felt her anger dissolve into ash and fall away, leaving her feeling almost naked on the hillside above her village.

"I'm…sorry, Marie," Benedict said at last, his strong shoulders drooping. "I'm sorry for saying that, and for acting like a complete arse. I know my apology doesn't mean much to you—"

"It means nothing at all," she interrupted, trying to maintain her façade of indignation.

"But it was a foolish thing I said, and I wish I hadn't said it," Benedict finished. He looked down, a dark cloud passing behind his eyes of blue. Marie was seized with a sudden and inexplicable impulse to hold and comfort this man, to take away his sadness. Somehow the man's torn, dirty clothes looked pitiable to her, rather than laughable, his hair shining like gold in the meagre sunlight that peeked through the clouds.

At last, she sighed, folding her arms, and looking to him with sympathy. "You didn't know what my life was really like," Marie said gently. "You couldn't. I know that."

"I could have tried harder, though." Benedict laughed grimly and lowered himself onto a flat rock at the top of the hill, resting his elbows on his knees and his chin atop his fists. "You were right. I've paid precious little attention to what's around me. Typical for me, I'm sorry to say."

Without realising what she was doing, Marie sat beside him on the rock, looking out at the village and feeling the heat from his body right next to her.

"Do you know something? All day long, I've been reminding myself that I am a prisoner here, that these people are my enemies and this place nothing but a den of thieves." Marie looked to him in surprise, and that damnable sardonic grin returned to his lips. "I've had the devil's own time of it, too. Every fibre of my being, every faculty and sense I have are screaming at me that these are just people trying to live, and despite where I know the money comes from, your gang is doing good for your neighbours."

"It's harder than anything else in the world," Marie muttered. She felt Benedict turn his body closer to her, his eyes lingering on her mouth as she spoke sadly, "I've had to do the same for myself. To tell myself that the people we take from have enough, that they've done something wrong and deserve a little rough treatment. That the silly ladies dancing at balls are my foes even when I feel so sure, deep inside me, that they aren't."

From somewhere in the distance a crow cawed its lonely call from a barren tree. Marie breathed in deeply, feeling herself shake as she felt Benedict's body close enough to hers that they were nearly touching. Their breaths mingled in the cloudy sky above her world.

"Does it ever stop feeling so terrible?" asked Benedict in a soft voice.

Marie swallowed and looked up at his piercing blue eyes. "I don't know," she breathed. "I hope so."

Benedict's head leaned forward, and Marie matched this step without thinking. Their foreheads were nearly touching, their lips perilously close to one another. "Maybe it's something we shouldn't fight," he said in a voice scarcely louder than a whisper. "Maybe it's an important part of us that we would do well to listen to."

Marie drank in his warm breath with her own. Her eyes fluttered closed, her insides twisting and squirming with anticipation as she heard him say, "Maybe I need to start believing in the goodness of your people just as you need to stop robbing and stealing when you know it's wrong. Maybe the whole gang needs to do the same thing before it's too late."

Her eyes shot open. He saw she was already on her feet and hastening away from him, pack slung over her back. She paid no more attention to his slow, sombre moves to follow her than she did to the tears that threatened to pour from her if he said one more word.

Chapter 8

Where Our Loyalties Lie

“Benedict.”

“Yes,” he answered.

Their lips came together then in a glorious explosion of desire. His fingers lost themselves in a labyrinth of thick black hair, and as he touched her, he could feel her heartbeat through the empty night that wrapped around them like a cloak.

“Benedict.” Her voice was sweeter than honey, laden with an intense longing that Benedict felt within his own breast. He wanted to hear her say it again, a thousand more times, but instead, his hand wrapped around hers and pulled her into a deeper kiss still.

Theirs was a bed made of clouds suspended in the very firmament of the heavens, a scattering of stars winking down at them from everywhere. Yet, Benedict felt as strong and sure as he had ever been. Her arms linked behind his head, pulling him deeper into the cloud after her. Their bodies met.

“Benedict,” she whispered, her tongue flicking deliciously against his ear. Her voice was quiet, so quiet he could barely hear her over their ragged breathing, and he pulled himself closer still against her to better hear.

“Benedict.” She spoke his name again, and as she looked at him with those powerful grey eyes, Benedict felt the fire within him burn higher and hotter and brighter and brighter—

Benedict’s eyes opened. He felt himself shot through with alarm—where was he, what was happening?—then with regret as he realised that this wonderful dream had come crashing to an end.

He sat upon the small, lumpy cot he had been given for his narrow little room in the Devons’ cellar. His limbs were sore, his neck stiff from the poor straw mattress, but he paid no mind to any of that. He had something far more worrisome on his mind.

“I want her,” Benedict said aloud, his gaze fixed on the motes of dust that floated down the shaft of sunlight that streamed down the stairs. To his still-sleepy eyes, the glowing golden flecks seemed to dance through the air with a grace and beauty that could only make him think of Marie.

It felt as true and natural to him as drawing breath—he longed for Marie as he had no other woman in his life. The attraction he felt toward her was as fearsome and all-consuming as a raging tiger, more so even than his first male stirrings in his youth, but with something still larger and more powerful lurking just beneath the surface.

What is this I’m feeling? Benedict asked himself, feeling his heart thunder in his chest. *What is it about her that’s so different from every other woman? Is it merely this strange, exciting situation I find myself in, that makes her smile so much lovelier, her brashness so appealing?*

Benedict stood and stretched, trying to ease some of the creaks and

aches in his limbs from the previous day's hours of work. In his mind, he pored over the events that had transpired in this strange gang's village, hoping to recall something he could point to as a way to win his challenge, to tell Mark Devons about as proof that his gang was nothing more than a pack of thugs. Yet his memory would only supply images of how prettily Marie's luscious black hair had blown in the wind on the hilltop, how his stomach had burbled happily whenever he coaxed a smile out of her.

Then he remembered the things she had said to him about how hard her life had been, and his heart twisted with grief for her. The thought that a woman as beautiful and unique as she, should be consigned to a life of toil and hardship seemed more a crime than anything her father's gang had ever done.

"She's wrong, though," he told himself under his breath, hoping he could convince himself if he said it aloud. "She and her father, they're both wrong. It's not right, what's befallen their village, but it doesn't excuse robbing and kidnapping and God knows what else they do in London."

Something's afoot upstairs, Benedict thought, shaking his head to clear the cobwebs from the corners of his mind. Footsteps and voices, more of them than he'd heard since arriving here.

Since you were abducted and brought here, you fool, he reminded himself sternly. *Don't get so taken with a pretty face that you lose what few wits you have left.*

* * *

I never would have guessed this little house could hold so much excitement,

he breathed as he climbed the last step to the main floor of the house. *Or so many people.*

Benedict counted at least a dozen rough-looking men bustling to and fro in the main room of the house. Every one of them was occupied with some activity or another, packing objects into bags or wrapping pieces of wood with oil-soaked rags. One man he recognised from Merrick's, a tall man with wiry muscles, was sharpening a wicked-looking knife by the hearth and glaring at Benedict. He could see Marie preparing horses outside through the open windows and raised his voice to call to her.

Instead, he grunted as Mark shoved an empty sack into Benedict's hands, knocking the air out of him.

"Look alive there, lad," said the old rogue, clad in a dark coat and showing little of the humour that Benedict had grown accustomed to. "There's a job to be done, no time for napping."

"What's going on?" Benedict asked, trying to ignore the stares he drew from the unsavoury-looking men as they passed him by on their errands.

Mark looked at him impatiently. "There's a Dutch tradesman coming up the coast on his way to London. Word is he's carrying enough to keep the village fed and warm through the winter, near as much as your daddy's paying for your sorry hide." This last sentiment was echoed with growls and laughter from the rest of the gang.

"And what is it you mean to do?"

“Rob him!” Mark laughed. “We may be in the business of helping little old ladies and passing out goodies to the children, but we’re still a gang, boy. The money for all those fine things has to come from somewhere, and it might as well be a foreigner who’s just drained the purses of all your fancy London friends, eh?” He slapped Benedict on the shoulder again and gestured for him to get moving.

But Benedict did not move from his spot. Instead he glowered at Mark and dropped the empty sack on the floor. The room fell into a hush as every eye turned to this exchange. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Marie slip into the house, her eyes shouting a warning that he knew he couldn’t heed.

“You told me you wouldn’t have me harm anyone, Devons,” Benedict said between clenched teeth.

“I’m not in the habit of explaining myself to people in my gang, lad, so I’ll tell you this only once: this doesn’t have to involve harm unless you make it that way. Nobody needs to get hurt, the tradesman least of all, if everyone follows instructions.” Devon’s voice was quiet now and cold as ice.

For a second, Benedict thought he was going to draw his knife on him again, but instead, the man’s muscles relaxed, and he patted Benedict on the shoulder. “But then again,” he chuckled, “if your heart isn’t in it, we won’t exactly want you coming along and spoiling the affair. Marie, Jeb, and a few others can take care of a little highway encounter well enough without you, I think. Why don’t you go saddle the horses and leave the real work to men who—”

“No!”

The tall man stood from his chair, the razor-sharp knife in his hand glinting menacingly in the firelight. He pointed a finger at Benedict as Mark wheeled on him with a heavy stomp of his foot.

"Got something to say, have you, Will?"

The man called Will nodded, his gaze still fixed, unblinking, on Benedict's face. "I want him with us on this job. Seems to me if he's helping us, he'd better help us when we need it."

"And I say he's staying here. Dunno why we're talking about it any further than that, mate." Mark's posture was casual in response to this challenge, thumbs hooked in his belt and eyes half-hooded. But Benedict could see immediately that Will was playing with fire.

"I don't think he should be left alone here in the village. He's had his run of the place for a couple of days now—who's to say what he could get up to when we're away?"

Mark shifted his weight from one foot to the other. "That's my decision, Will, not yours. Has been for as long as we've had this gang. No room for second-guessing."

A few of the gang members murmured their agreement with Mark at these words. But Will only folded his arms, chin set with determination. "You told us he gave his word he'd help us, Devons, that he'd work for us. If you believe him, then tell him to come help like any other man in the gang. If not, you'd better tie him up like a hog and ask for a bigger ransom. Elsewise, why should any of us believe you anymore?"

Benedict's muscles knotted with tension as he saw Mark take in the atmosphere in the room—from the nods and muttered assents from the other ruffians, it looked like Will spoke for more than just himself. After a long pause full of menace, at last, Mark shrugged and walked away, bobbing his head noncommittally.

"Sorry, lad," Mark said quietly as he clapped Benedict on the shoulder a bit limply. "Try not to get yourself killed. Or anyone else, for that matter. And we're talking about this when the job's finished," he added, jabbing a finger in Will's direction.

"Here, I still haven't agreed to this. You told me that this gang was about helping people, not criminal behaviour, and…" Benedict stopped before he could say another word. Amid the grumbling gang members going back about their work, he saw Will approach Marie and take one of her hands in his spindly fingers. She tried to pull it away, but Will whispered something to her and she simply stood and listened, her face turning grey at what he said. All Benedict managed to make out were the words 'leave the gang.'

"Don't tell me you've got more objections to keeping your word?" Mark asked, pulling Benedict back to the present situation.

Marie's eyes fell on Benedict's. For the first time since he had met her, those lovely grey orbs looked to be brimming over with fear.

"No." Benedict picked up the sack from the floor. "I'm coming along."

* * *

The day was warm despite the blanket of clouds overhead, and the party of thieves had struck out at a leisurely pace, their horses meandering over hills and through thickets in a nearly silent single file. They were no more than an hour's ride from the road where they would set their ambush for the tradesman and his bounty. Benedict knew if he was going to devise a plan of action, he needed to do it right now.

But despite the deadly dilemma he found himself in now—was there any way he could stay true to both his word and his honour whilst also shielding Marie from harm? Benedict was unable to focus his mind on the problem at hand.

How can anyone focus with such a woman pressed up close to him? he thought, clenching his fingers into fists. Perhaps sensing his struggle, Marie sighed and tossed her black locks in the wind, battering Benedict in the face with her hair from her position seated in front of him on their shared saddle.

"Oh, sorry," she said with a smirk audible in her voice. "I forgot you were back there."

"Hmph," Benedict grunted, gritting his teeth and trying to ignore the sensation of Marie's generous derriere up against his manhood.

When the gang had at last been ready to embark on their bloody errand, Benedict had been dismayed to see that he would not be given a horse of his own. "I may be in a tough spot, but I'm not bloody stupid," Mark had laughed, and the gang had laughed harder still when Benedict was instructed to share a horse with the smallest member of the gang…who turned out to be Marie, naturally.

If he was unsure of himself this morning, by this point in the afternoon, he was downright frantic, his mind beset by the quandary of what he should do even as his body screamed at the proximity of Marie's flesh to his own. The old brown mare between their legs walked at a steady rhythm, sliding Benedict's legs up against Marie's, and it took everything he had not to rest his hands on her lush, feminine hips.

"Don't get any ideas whilst you're back there," Marie had said when he first climbed into the saddle behind her. He'd nodded at this, determined to behave as a proper gentleman…but seeing her wink after speaking these words shot him full of doubt as well as enough obscene mental images to fill the devil's own gallery.

As the day wore on, Marie continued to tease him wordlessly on their hours-long ride, cruel woman that she was. Periodically she would reach a hand back and slap his away from her waist, and he complied as instructed.

Yet as Benedict slid himself further back in the saddle to avoid pressing his burgeoning arousal against her copious backside, Marie would slide herself right back against him. He could hear her breathing grow heavier as she did so, driving him still further into the throes of desperately restrained lust.

Is she truly enjoying being this close to me? Benedict thought as he swallowed. *Or is she simply playing with me as a cat does a mouse?*

Blessedly, he was snapped out of his reverie when the point of Marie's knife grazed his thigh, causing him to yelp in pain. Blushing and protesting that he was unhurt when Marie asked, he seized on the moment of clear thinking that had fallen to him.

I cannot allow this to go on, Benedict thought, chewing on his lower lip. *These men are robbers and killers, and they mean to take an honest man's money, perhaps even his life. Breaking my vow to a thief is a small price to pay to protect an innocent tradesman.*

Then Benedict remembered the way he had seen Will look at Marie. *Perhaps if I can persuade her to leave with me, we could avoid all this madness entirely…*

"We must almost be there by now," Benedict whispered. Marie grunted some monosyllabic confirmation of this estimation.

"I wonder if the tradesman has any idea what's in store for him?" Benedict muttered under his breath. He felt Marie sit up straighter in the saddle, her posture growing rigid. "It would be a terrible shame if he had a family who would miss him if he were to be kidnapped by an opportunistic band of thieves."

"Quiet," Marie whispered back to him, keeping her eyes forward.

"Or I wonder if he too, is providing for someone?" Benedict asked, his voice growing slightly louder as his tone grew bolder. "Maybe there's another village somewhere in Holland that's waiting desperately for that money?"

"Maybe. Probably not. Now hold your tongue," Marie hissed, turning in her seat to scowl at him. Benedict saw the man called Jeb riding ahead of them slowly, but he knew he had to take this opportunity.

Clearing his throat, Benedict continued, “I suppose we’ll never know. Maybe we’ll be lucky, and the man will be deserving of being robbed and murdered.”

Marie snapped, “We’re not going to murder anyone!”

“No, no, of course not. You’ve got a gentle, careful crew of cutthroats working in this gang, I can see that. I’m sure you’ve never known any of them to get careless or panic, have you?”

The silence with which Marie answered this question told Benedict all he needed to know. He leaned up close to her and decided to press his luck further. “You’re meaning to leave the gang, aren’t you?” he asked, praying he had inferred Will’s meaning correctly.

“How did—you don’t know what you’re talking about!” Marie exploded.

“Because you know what you’re doing is wrong,” Benedict continued over her protestations, his voice rising to be heard over what she was saying. “Why not now, Marie? Why let one more man suffer because you haven’t gotten around to doing what you know you should, what you must do?”

“Stop all that talk, I’m warn—”

“It’s not too late. Turn the horse aside. We can put an end to all this right now. You don’t have to be strong like this anymore. You don’t

have to hurt others so your village can—”

The pair froze, silent as the grave, as the air was split by a loud whistle from just ahead of them on the road. Jeb had stopped on his horse and was pointing directly at Benedict and Marie. “Oi, Mark!” he said in a loud, clear voice that rang from the hills on either side of the road. “His Highness is up to somethin’!”

Marie pulled the horse to a stop, and it was a matter of seconds until they were surrounded by a dozen members of the gang with violence in their eyes. “What’s going on back here, then?” asked Mark, having ridden back on his coal-black steed from the front of the column.

Jeb nodded in Benedict’s direction. “He was tryin’ to talk Marie into runnin’ off with him. I heard him, I did.”

Benedict half-expected Marie to have her knife at his throat by this point. But instead, in a trembling voice, she spoke up, “Father, he wasn’t—”

Mark ignored her, instead turning and swinging the back of his fist into Will’s cheek. The man may have grown old and frail from drink, but this punch still nearly knocked the younger man from his horse. “See that, lads? *This* is why you don’t go contradicting me. Now we’ve got a bigger problem than before.”

Will rubbed the side of his face ruefully. His face was flushed and angry, but he accepted this punishment without complaint as the other gang members muttered their renewed allegiance to Mark. This quickly changed to a spirited argument about how they should proceed.

“So, what do we do now?”

“Can’t spare any man to take him back to the village….”

“I knew we couldn’t trust him. Bloody liability.”

“We can’t bring him with us now, Mark. He’ll give us away or worse,” protested a one-eyed man with a nasty wood axe in his hand.

“I say we leave him here, then,” announced Jeb. “Tie him to that old rowan there. We’ll be done with the job in a few hours, then we’ll come back and collect him. Er, if you think that’s best, Mark.”

The gang fell silent as they watched their boss deliberate. Benedict opened his mouth to protest but was silenced by a keen look from Will, who drew his knife and snarled.

At last, Mark nodded to Jeb. “Do it,” he said, shaking his head sadly. He gave Benedict a withering look as the gang pulled him from his horse and dragged him to the gnarled old tree and began lashing him to the trunk with a length of rope. “I know I shouldn’t be surprised at what the word of a duke’s son is really worth. Let’s hope you’re still here when we get back, or I’ve a hunch Gower’s Grove won’t make it through the season.”

Through all of this, Benedict could not take his eyes from Marie. She spoke not a word and would only glance in his direction once before turning her horse away to follow the rest of the gang. Her eyes were

tinged with red, her shoulders stooped.

"Marie!" he called out, wriggling in place against the tree despite the bark that cut at his back. "*Marie!"*

But if she heard him before she winked out of sight around the bend in the road, she gave no sign. Before he could draw another breath, Benedict's words had dissipated into the air, leaving him alone and helpless as a warm rain began to fall.

* * *

Benedict strained against his ropes for the better part of an hour, long after the sky had turned the colour of ash, then a darker grey still, like the smoke from a wet cook fire. The rain continued its meagre assault upon the earth, turning the dirt road into a muddy streak and plastering Benedict's yellow hair to his scalp. Shouting for help accomplished nothing but turning his throat raw and hoarse.

This is hopeless! he thought, clenching his teeth with fury. Exasperated, he let himself go limp, his body hanging against the ropes like a corpse.

Well done, Benedict. You've gotten yourself trussed up in the rain, unable to help Marie, the tradesman the gang means to ambush, or yourself. And on top of everything else, you're going to catch a cold sitting in this rain all night long. Bloody bravo.

He gave a deep, heavy sigh that pulled him further in his lifeless posture drooping forward from the tree that had become his prison.

The final look Marie had given him haunted his vision.

She looked so sad, then, so terribly sad. It occurred to him that this fact was more upsetting to him than all the other ways he had failed today. For an instant, he had really believed she would run away with him, that they would make their way to safety and, more importantly, he would win that second glorious kiss he had almost stolen on the hillside.

Benedict shook his head, confounded with his own emotions. *The woman really must have bewitched you somehow for you to act such a fool.*

He drew in a sharp breath in alarm as he felt himself pitch forward suddenly, then stop just as abruptly. Craning his neck to one side, he saw that the rope was now wet enough from the rain that the knot had begun to slip. A laugh escaped his lips. *In despair I find my deliverance,* he thought with a grin.

Instead of pulling, now Benedict worked to shake the ropes that tied him to the tree, jostling this loop or that until it was slack enough that he could slip free of it.

Standing on the little hillock on which he had been made captive, Benedict cast about for any sign of settlement or civilization. *There was smoke over that hill, perhaps a mile or two ago. Devons and his gang said they'd wanted to avoid it. Surely, someone there could call for the authorities, or at least point me to London.*

He smiled, taking his first steps as a free man in what felt like a lifetime. But he hadn't made it ten yards before he stopped once more in his tracks. *The gang expects the tradesman to pass at sunset. There's no*

way I could summon help to the attack site before that.

Benedict took another step to his liberation, then another, shaking his head to dismiss the madness that was welling up unbidden from some awful pit of valour he had been sure he did not possess. *It's not my problem. I'm an innocent victim in all this. Let someone else worry about the gang.*

But…who will take care of Marie then? Benedict felt his heart seize in place at the thought that he might never see her again. If something terrible happened, who would be there to protect her from the vengeance of the crown or the savagery of the gang?

Don't do it, Benedict. Leave it alone. Take care of yourself first.

The flickering sense of wrongness came upon him now for the first time in days. It was no mere flicker now but a flaming brand, a tumultuous cry from some deep part of him that something was wrong, terribly wrong.

You damned fool, he thought as he ran not to freedom but after the gang. The road was muddy and full of puddles, but his feet flew swift and true into the danger he now knowingly pursued.

Chapter 9

Deliverance

"I don't know what's taking them so bloody long," Marie cursed, shifting her weight uncomfortably under her. From her position atop this rocky outcropping, she had a clear view of the tradesman's carts that trundled down the road in her direction…but between the light, steady rain and the itchiness in her fingers to get the task done with, it felt to her that the horses pulling the carts were swimming through molasses.

Marie bit her lip hard to keep herself from crying out in frustration. She knew her father had the right of it, when he told the gang to split up along this section of the road, with rocks and trees lining the narrow dirt highway and giving them a perfect position for a surprise attack. But despite her functional attire and her freshly sharpened knife in hand, she felt unbearably isolated and vulnerable by herself.

The carts pulled closer still, until she could clearly see the weary eyes of the drivers. Marie ducked back behind the mossy rock she had chosen as a hiding place, waiting for the carts to move past her. She was to take them from the rear. All she needed to do was wait a few more moments, until she heard the signal to spring out.

With a little luck, the fat Dutch tradesman and his hirelings would surrender at the gang's show of force. *"Home and dry before midnight, and with a payday like we've never seen,"* her father had said confidently.

Why the devil are they moving so slowly? she thought, aching as the seconds crawled by. She tugged at the open collar of her shirt, feeling as though she might choke in the oppressively wet air.

In the long moments of waiting as the wagons creaked past not twenty yards from where she hid, Marie's thoughts returned for the thousandth time to the man who had haunted her thoughts ever since she'd first seen him.

Blast that Benedict. Why did he have to put up such a fight?

She had relished the teasing she had given him on the ride that afternoon, not only because he was an alarmingly entertaining man to torment, she'd discovered, but because the close contact with his tall, manly frame sent quiet shivers of excitement through Marie's body. Heedless of the imminent danger, a smile came to her lips, her eyes fluttering closed at the memory of his breath on her neck.

Would it have been so terrible? she wondered, her breath coming slow and even in the summer rain. *Running off with him, leaving all this behind? No one to care for or fight for, just he and I on the road, living by our wits and existing purely for one another?* Marie wondered what it must be like to surrender herself to the protection of another.

Something tugged at the peripheries of her senses. A queer sound echoed down from the boughs of the withered old oaks, like the call of a melancholy exotic bird. Marie felt her blood run cold—it was the signal!

Silently, so as not to provoke any alarmed counterattack from the travellers, she drew her knife and rushed out onto the road behind the carts. As she did so, she heard the drivers pull their teams to a stop

with a loud cry, and she saw Will, Jeb, and other members of the gang melt out of the shadows on all sides of the road.

"Good evening, gentlemen," she heard her father's voice boom from his position at the front of the line of carts. "Nothing to be alarmed about. So long as you keep your hands where we can see them, my gang and I will have you home and dry before—"

A cold fist closed around her heart as her father's voice was stopped by a mighty roar that came from the middle cart. The cart's oilcloth cover was thrown aside, and a dozen guards armed with rifles sprang from the interior.

"No!" Marie cried.

All around them was turned into chaos. The dim quiet of the evening rain was split by a blast from a rifle muzzle, then another, then another still. Marie covered her ears, momentarily deafened by the sound. Someone shouted to run, and somehow amidst the clamour, she saw Jeb fleeing into the woods, one hand clutching his arm as it dripped blood behind him.

Some voice within her cried, *Run!* A hundred other voices shouted to stay, to fight, to see if her father had been hit by gunfire, but they all came too late. Without knowing what was happening, Marie was flying through the woods quickly, too quickly. She was sure she would turn her ankle or jump from a high rock without realising what she was doing, but she ran all the same.

Footsteps followed her, and more shouts. Realising she must have dropped her knife at some point in her mad flight, Marie sprinted as hard as she could through the woods. She vaulted over fallen logs and

ducked under low branches, unsure where she was going but knowing she had to put as much distance as possible between herself and the soldiers.

Where did they come from? she wondered, fighting to keep breathing. *Did they know we were coming, somehow? Or—*

An explosion sounded, so loud it seemed to be right next to her. Marie's ears were ringing. She was sure she must have been hit by the gunfire, and as she launched herself over a rock, she felt her feet slip out from under her in a spray of mud. She tried to scramble back to her feet, but a jolt of pain lanced through her ankle, sending her falling back into the wet earth.

Have to get away. Have to—

But even as she struggled onto all fours, then back to her feet, she heard footsteps right beside her, and then she was trapped in strong arms and pulled upright.

"No, let me go!" Marie cried, hot tears spilling from her eyes as her fists shook helplessly in the air. "Help, don't shoot me, don't—"

"Marie, stay, stay yourself! It's all right. It's me. It's Benedict!"

Her eyes shot open. There, in the dim wetness of the wood, was the face of Benedict shining like a beacon before her eyes. He had never seemed more handsome to her than at that moment, when he looked a veritable angel looking on her face with a beatific smile.

“What?” Benedict asked. Marie’s ears were still singing a keening hum from the gunfire, her eyes still spinning with confusion. After a breath, she realised she had babbled something incomprehensible from her place in his arms.

“Help,” she repeated. “Help me, I…the gang…” Marie swallowed something terrible and sharp in her throat. “I’m in trouble.”

A pained expression passed before Benedict’s face at these words. Before Marie could figure out what was happening, his muscular arms escorted her to a massive pine tree. He listened, then lifted a finger in front of his lips and snuck around the trunk to creep up the hill Marie had just fallen down.

She held her breath to keep herself from crying out in pain and fear, and the wooded hillside was silent save for the rain for a long time. Eventually, to her horror, the footsteps grew closer again; to Marie, it sounded like there were thousands of them. Then she heard their horrid voices.

“…think he went over this way, Bert.”

“I dunno, I think we should head back. The others could use a bit of help cleaning up the rest, don’t you think?”

The sounds drew closer and closer still. Marie looked down and realised she had grabbed a length of tough, knotted wood in her right hand, and with all her might she rose and swung the club as soon as the sound was close enough to touch.

“Look out!”

Marie’s teeth rattled in her head as the club connected with its target, and a man fell to the ground in a heap. She raised the weapon to strike again, but saw another man, too far away for her to reach, with a rifle pointed right at her. No sooner had he cocked the weapon, though, than Benedict came tearing from the trees behind him, tackling the man to the ground and sending his rifle flying.

“Behind you, Benedict!” Marie cried just as a man put the barrel of his rifle around Benedict’s throat, pulling him in as Benedict’s eyes grew wide with shock and pain. She rushed over to him, bringing her club up for another savage attack when she found herself grabbed and held in place by a foul-smelling man. Marie yelped as the man whirled her about to look in her face. His eyes were small and piggish, his jowls jiggling with exertion, but struggle as she might, he would not release her.

“Oi, this one’s a girl, lads,” said the fat-faced man with a cackle. “Here now, what are you—”

She tumbled through the air, landing roughly enough on the ground that the wind was knocked out of her. Flipping herself over hurriedly, she saw Benedict delivering another punch to the face of the fat-faced man, knocking him to the ground as something red flew from his mouth.

And over his shoulder, she saw two more men with knives stalking up close to him. Marie opened her mouth to scream a warning, but no sound came out. It was all like a horrible nightmare.

Marie blinked. There, right in easy reach of her fingers on the trampled grass by the fallen guard, was a pistol. She was unable to fathom how it came to be there, but all the same, she rose to her feet and levelled it at the two soldiers who were still standing. Her ankle hurt no longer; her body felt coiled and powerful like a steel spring.

“Hands up!” she barked in a voice she did not recognise. “Do it, or I’ll shoot! I swear it, I will!”

But this last vow proved to be unneeded, for the men had already turned and fled. She did not lower the pistol until she no longer heard their staggering footsteps.

Marie breathed for the first time in several long moments. She felt at the same time that she wanted to dance with joy and to vomit on the grass beneath her feet. She blew out a long breath and turned to Benedict, but her smile was erased when she saw the wrath on his face as he stomped toward her.

“What the devil were you thinking, playing at a deadly business like that?” he barked. “Didn’t I tell you? Didn’t I warn you that exactly this kind of thing was going to happen?”

Marie huffed, shot through with a hidden reserve of indignant energy. “And just what do you mean to do about it by snapping at me? If you’re really that angry, why didn’t you just leave me to those guards? Or better yet, run back to your father in London like you’ve wanted?”

Benedict grabbed her roughly by the shoulders, and Marie dropped the pistol to the ground in her surprise. His eyes were alight with a fire she had not seen before. “Stupid girl! I came after you because I

was worried for *you!*"

"Wh…why were you worried for me?" Marie asked, her voice growing thin. *What in heaven's name is he talking about? His freedom was in his hand…but he put it aside to follow me?* "What did—?"

Without another word, Benedict answered her by pulling her close and kissing her on the lips with passionate force. Her eyes shot open in protest, but it was less than a heartbeat until her fingers laced through his hair and pulled him deeper still into their kiss. Marie's knees went out from under her, and she was completely, deliciously in his power.

* * *

The only thing that could compel Benedict to bring this embrace to an end was his chilling realisation that more foes could be lurking nearby. Sadly, feeling as though he were cutting off a wonderful and vibrant part of himself, he pulled away from Marie and looked around them.

The woods were quiet. Whatever had happened, it seemed to have come to an end, one way or another. He picked up the discarded pistol and smiled wryly as he examined it. Its shot had already been spent; Marie had defeated two enemies with an empty gun.

"We should leave this place. Can you walk?" Benedict asked softly. He felt Marie squirm and realised with surprise that he still held her tight in his arms. Releasing her, she took two hesitant steps and nodded, her cheeks dark though her pale skin was nearly luminescent in the moonless night.

“Back to Gower’s Grove, then. If we’re lucky we may be able to find one of the gang’s horses, run off in the confusion.”

“No,” Marie protested, putting a hand on Benedict’s shoulder. His heart fluttered at the touch. “We have to go back to the carts, Benedict. We have to see if everyone got away. If not…”

His every instinct told him this idea was folly, but there was no arguing with those wondrous grey eyes. “All right,” Benedict said, stuffing the discarded pistol into his belt. *Perhaps she can repeat her trick if the situation calls for it.*

It was a long, difficult hike through the woods and down hills. Though the rain had finally come to a stop, twilight had nearly passed into darkness and the terrain was still rugged and wet, and Marie was unsure just which way she had run from the ambush point. Benedict found that he did not mind their difficult passage, however, as Marie insisted on holding tight to his hand so they would not get separated.

Eventually, they fell upon the place where the ill-fated attack had been launched. The smell of gunpowder still hung heavy in the air, and here and there on the road, they spotted small dark stains that resembled blood, but they saw not another soul.

“Look,” said Marie, pointing to a dark shape a little ways down the road. They silently crept over to it, discovering it was one of the three wagons, its crumpled form bereft of driver or team. “But why would they leave one of the carts behind?” she asked, puzzled.

“One of the axles is broken,” Benedict pointed out. “They must have

abandoned it."

Benedict looked around. He thought to call out but did not want to alert any guards who remained. Now that the rain had passed, the hills and woods cried out with the calls of frogs and night birds, each sound portending a hidden assailant.

"Come on, Marie," he said softly. "We'd best be gone before someone returns for this cart. Your friends have either escaped or been captured, and we'll find out which as soon as we're back in Gower's Grove."

"Wait a moment. I want to look to see if anything was left behind." Her voice was muffled. Marie had climbed halfway into the abandoned cart and was rooting around the contents.

"Marie, we can't afford to—"

"Aha!" Marie crawled back out from the broken cart, clutching something small in her hands. "I told you there might be something. Look, one of the men must have lost this in the fight with our gang!"

She held aloft a pocket watch, a look of triumph on her face. It looked to be a fairly well-made thing, Benedict thought with dismay, but hardly valuable in any meaningful way. He shrugged and gave a bitter laugh. "Quite a payday to risk the lives of half the gang for," Benedict said wryly.

"Are you joking?" Marie asked, her eyes wide with amazement. She cradled the thing in her hands as though it were the egg of a rare and

beautiful bird. “Do you know how much this could fetch? Even a stingy fence would give enough to fund half the families in Gower’s Grove for a month!”

Leaning closer in case he had missed some hidden jewel or minute workmanship, Benedict felt his jaw tighten. *It really is nothing all that extraordinary,* he thought. *I’ve half a dozen at home, as well as some far finer ones in Father’s house. I’ve barely even worn most of them.*

A sudden and powerful surge of guilt reached up and wrapped around Benedict’s lungs. He felt his vision narrow at the terrible feeling of shame that washed over him. *This kind of bauble is life-changing for Marie and her people—more, it’s life-*sustaining. *And I’ve so many that I don’t even know what to do with them, nor would I care if every one of them disappeared.*

Benedict leaned heavily against the side of the ruined cart. *Here I have been beset with questions of right and wrong over common thievery…In what kind of world is it right for one family to hoard so much more than they need whilst others steal or starve?*

“No horses anywhere about,” said Marie, looking around them anxiously and tucking a discarded knife into her belt. “The village is too far to reach safely after dark. I know somewhere safe a bit closer, though. If we step carefully we should make it to the village by midnight.”

Benedict looked at Marie long and hard. The clouds had broken, scattering snowy white moonlight across her beautiful features. Even dressed in trousers and a brown thief’s coat, Marie was still the loveliest woman he had ever seen.

But a thief, all the same, he thought, his eyes running over the knife at her hip, the stolen watch in her pocket. *And she will escape justice with her stolen property thanks to my actions. Is that really something I can live with?*

For the first time, he could remember, Benedict sought out that flickering feeling of unease. All his life he had run from it, dismissed it as indigestion or the idle enterprise of a troubled mind. Now he pursued it, though, trusting its vicious judgment. Had he done wrong?

Marie interrupted his questions just then, offering him her gloved hand and looking down at him with a delighted smile. Benedict felt his breath stolen from him as he discovered yet another unexplored territory of her beauty—with the stars winking down on them, her deep grey eyes seemed to whirl and dance in a merriment of glowing white light. He drank in her smile, and life rushed into his limbs so complete and beautiful that he felt as though he had woken from a despairing dream that had lasted his whole existence up to this point.

“Come on, Benedict,” she said sweetly, moonlight illuminating her plump lips as they curled in a grin. “Our work’s done. Let’s go.”

Benedict smiled. He took Marie’s hand, stood, and followed her.

Chapter 10

Good Practise

The latch gave with a shallow *thunk*, and it only took Marie a bit of effort to push open the window despite the rust that had formed over the hinges.

She felt herself break into a satisfied grin and glanced back at Benedict to share in her triumph. Her smile was immediately erased, though, on seeing the odd, occupied look on Benedict's face. He seemingly hadn't noticed her success; indeed, his brow was furrowed as though beset by troubling thoughts.

I didn't think he suffered any real injury in our brawl with the guards. Though he has been oddly quiet over the hour it took, Marie thought as she slipped through the open window into the dark house. In a trice, she found her way to the door, unlocked it, and swung it open.

"There, what did I tell you?" she asked proudly, gesturing for Benedict to come through the now open portal. "Nothing to it, if you've got a little determination."

Benedict's first response to her appearance was surprise, as though she had awoken him from a dream. But after a moment he smiled, his teeth glittering white in the light of the moon above. "Which would be helpful if I had as much determination in my whole body as you have in your little finger."

Marie gave a mock curtsy in gratitude for these words, hoping to disguise the thrill that ran down her spine at the compliment. They shared a laugh when Marie realised she was still wearing trousers rather than a dress, then she retreated to the interior of the house to see if she could find what she needed to build a fire.

“Where are we? Is…is this the gang’s house?” Benedict’s voice echoed from the empty walls.

Marie piled a few bits of kindling in the cold hearth, then continued peering around the dark interior for something more substantial to burn. “Not exactly. We’ve used it for a hiding place once before, but I still think of it as the Potley’s house. We’re actually not that far from Gower’s Grove, near enough that some of our farming families live out this way.”

“Potley? Ah, so some relations of—”

“Missus Potley the washerwoman, yes.” A melancholy note crept into Marie’s voice. “Her son married a young woman from Chelmsford. After their baby died a couple of years ago, they left to find somewhere better, like so many others. There just wasn’t anything to keep them here.”

“What about his mother?”

“Old Missus Potley refused to leave, said she wouldn’t walk away from the only home she’d ever known.” Marie sighed, setting the cobwebs up on the rafters swaying. “It’s a terrible shame. Robert Potley was as fine a woodworker as anyone I’ve ever known. The village has lost so many good and talented people over the last few years.”

She expected some quip or witticism at this sentence, but Benedict fell quiet. Marie frowned, sensing he was still troubled by something, but she left him to brood as she searched through the remains of the abandoned house.

Within a few minutes, she returned, struggling under the weight of a dusty but exquisitely made wooden cabinet. “It’s all right, I have it,” Marie said as Benedict rose to help her. She set it down with a thump in the middle of the room, and the two of them looked it over in the pale moonlight. The hinges swung open easily despite the obvious neglect shown the piece of furniture, revealing an empty cabinet made of polished walnut.

“You don’t mean to burn a lovely thing like this, do you?” Benedict asked, a dour look on his face.

“Of course not. There’s a bit of firewood round back. But look.” Marie fumbled around the backside of the top of the cabinet, then pressed a small, concealed place in the join between compartments, prompting a small hidden door to open on the side of the cabinet.

She laughed as Benedict audibly gasped at this demonstration. “Marvellous!”

“Good old Robert. Always did like giving people places to keep their secrets.” Marie reached into the hidden door and pulled out an old bottle of wine with a grin. “Just as I’d hoped. I’d thought they had sold all his better pieces before leaving. I suppose there was no one nearby who would buy this one, and it was too big to take with them.”

The house once again lapsed into an eerie silence whilst Marie built a cheery fire in the fireplace. As she worked, Benedict sat on an empty, half-broken crate by the wall, the only thing left in the house beside a pile of forgotten fabric and the cabinet Marie had carried up from the cellar. With each moment of quiet that passed, Marie found herself growing more and more distracted by Benedict's pensive mood.

At last, when the fire was burning merrily and the doors and windows securely closed once more, Marie pulled the cork out of the wine bottle and sat on the crate beside Benedict with a satisfied sigh. Apart from a subtle stiffening of his posture, he did not respond to her sitting so close next to him.

"Do you want some?" Marie asked. "It's not poison, I don't think." She sniffed the bottle, took a small sip, and nodded in approval. "Not vinegar yet, either. No glasses, though, I'm afraid."

Benedict accepted the bottle and took a long pull from it. "Thanks," he said softly, passing it back to her.

Marie drank from the bottle and swallowed a generous gulp. It was good red wine, and it warmed her belly as it left a hint of spice on her tongue. *Lord knows where Robert managed to get it. He must have forgotten it here when they left.*

Several long minutes passed. Benedict stared into the fire, looking for something unknowable hidden within the embers, and Marie stared at Benedict. By the time they had silently consumed half the bottle, Marie decided she was tired of waiting.

"Ouch!" Benedict exclaimed, jerking away from Marie. He rubbed his

side and looked down at it worriedly. “I think something bit me.”

“Nothing bit you,” Marie said calmly, taking another sip of wine.

“How do you know?”

“Because I just pinched you.” Marie fixed him with a look of mock menace. “And I’ll keep on doing it, my lord, until you tell me what it is that’s bothering you so terribly.”

Benedict’s face broke open in a smile, one he swiftly erased and covered with his previous grim expression. “I’m not much in the mood for jokes, Marie. I don’t—*ouch*!”

“You’d better talk, my lord,” she said, giggling. “I’ve been told I can be most cruel to my captives.”

His hand reached out to grab onto hers, but Marie cannily reached out her other hand and pinched him on the belly, eliciting a yelp that dissolved into warm laughter.

“Once I tickled a man, *to death*!” Marie crowed. The two laughed long and loud in the little empty house, she poking and pinching at unguarded spots on his muscular body as he fought vainly to keep her away. Eventually, he managed to secure each of her hands in his own and held onto them tightly.

“You win,” Benedict said, coughing and shaking a tear of laughter

from his eye. “I’ll talk.”

“I knew you would. You nobles have no stamina.” Once he released her hands, Marie passed the bottle to Benedict and turned herself on the crate to look at him.

Benedict gave a long sigh and ran his fingers through his golden hair. “I don’t know what to say, I’m afraid. It’s as I told you the other day—I have wanted so terribly to believe that you and your gang are wrong for participating in such heinous crimes, no matter your justification. But seeing how badly things went tonight, how easily your fortunes can turn and you can end up dead…I know you don’t do these things lightly, or out of any cruelty or malice towards those other men. The only reason I can think that anyone would put themselves in jeopardy like that is if they believe they must.”

Marie opened her mouth, ready to gloat over having been proven right. But seeing the heaviness that still weighed on Benedict, she simply watched him and listened.

“That watch you found…” Benedict gave a grim, humourless laugh as Marie found herself subconsciously reaching to her pocket to make sure the watch was still safe within. “Would you believe that to my family, such a thing is nothing at all? That in Preston House we must have a score or more of such things kept shut up in a wardrobe that no one gives a thought to for months or years on end?”

“Yes. I would believe that,” Marie said, sensing from his silence that he really desired an answer to this question.

“My family would have to give up nothing, *less* than nothing, and we could better the lives of you and everyone else in the village. Yet do

we do it? Does any duke or baron or any other noble?" Benedict made a disgusted face.

Brilliant orange sparks danced their way up from the fireplace, wafting up the chimney in a column of smoke. "You feel guilty about how you live," said Marie softly.

"Of *course,* I feel guilty!" Benedict snapped. "My God, how could a man not feel guilty living in such excess whilst others starve on his account? For the first time, I can understand why my father and all his peers are so bloody drunk all the time. It's so they don't have to live with the truth that hangs over every day of their miserable lives."

It was a terrible thing, hearing so much pain and self-recrimination in Benedict's voice. As he spoke, Marie found herself leaning closer to him, and closer still. By the end of this speech, her hand found his shoulder and rubbed it tenderly.

"Fighting those men tonight, helping others rob and thieve…" He drank another gulp of wine, and Marie waited patiently as he swallowed and marshalled his thoughts. "Does it…does it still feel like this to you? When you do things like that?" he asked at last.

"Like what?"

"Like there are hooks sunk into your heart and pulling at it. Like you're doing something terrible, and the world would be better if only you weren't in it? Even though you've got a very good reason for doing what you're doing?"

Marie looked away, disarmed by how succinctly he had described a sensation she knew well but had never described to another soul. “Not as much as it used to. But yes. Every time.” She stood and went to feed another log to the fire. Even after she completed this task, she stood by the fire, rubbing her eyes with tired fingers. “I don’t like being a criminal, you know.”

She heard Benedict shift behind her, and she turned to look at him heedless of the tears welling up in her eyes. “You were right in your guess earlier today. I *do* mean to leave the gang. I was going to do it a while ago, but I stayed longer and longer.”

“To help your father.”

Marie nodded, scattering a tear onto the wooden floor. “Him and my sister…to help everyone. I couldn’t just leave them, much as I wanted to. I’ve promised Amelia I would leave a dozen times by now. I suppose I’m no better at keeping my word than any other thief.”

Benedict shook his head sadly at this, but did not move from his seat. “What do you mean to do, after you leave the gang?”

Marie snorted, certain if she spoke of her plans, she would be ridiculed for their foolishness. Yet the words spilt from her lips anyway. “Ammy and I, we…we’re going to open a shop. Here in Gower’s Grove. Don’t laugh.”

“I’m not.”

Gesturing ever more animatedly with her hands, Marie continued,

now that her tongue was loosed. “Gower’s Grove isn’t a village of thieves, Benedict, not really. Even though our village has dwindled, there still must be twenty or thirty craftsmen making things as good as Robert’s cabinets or better. We have potters, weavers, chefs, Benedict, and more than that. All we lack is the money and time we need to practice our trades. If Amelia and I can sell the village’s goods in our shop, we could make enough that the gang will never be needed again.”

She laughed mirthlessly, looking skyward as though to search for an excuse for the ridiculousness of her words. “Isn’t that an absolutely preposterous thought? As though no one else in the village ever had the thought of selling their wares, or somehow Ammy and I could manage to succeed where everyone else failed.”

Marie hid her face in her hands, groaning as if she could frighten away the river of tears that threatened to wash over her completely. *It’s never going to happen,* something inside her said. *Better never to speak of it again.*

Then she felt Benedict’s presence close to her. She lifted her face, hot and red from stifling tears, and saw him looking down at her from only a few feet away. “Why couldn’t it work?” he asked, his voice warm and kind and so lovely. “You’re unlike anyone I’ve ever known —if there’s a single harder-working man or woman anywhere in Britain, I’d die of shock. And if that’s not enough, surely the son of a duke can do something to help an absolutely preposterous little shop in the countryside.”

The world spun around her. In the time it took Marie to blink, her whole world suddenly looked to be a very different place.

“What do you mean?” she asked, her voice coming out as a croak. “How…why could you help? Why would you help me?”

Her skin crackled with electricity as Benedict delicately put his hands on her arms. She felt a surge of energy rush through her body, at once alarming and intoxicatingly pleasant, wanting both to flee as far as she could, and to beg him to hold her closer, harder, more.

"Well, it does take a fair amount of cash to open a shop, I imagine. Purchasing a vacant house from which to operate, a sign for the window, amenities for your clients, and so forth. I would imagine such matters are less than a trifle compared to the fortune of a duke, or at least his son. Not to sound immodest, of course."

Marie grinned. "Not you, not ever." Something bothersome tugged at the back of her mind at this prospect—*Would he really pay for all I need to be successful? Is that even something I would want?* But she dismissed this worry as trivial and lost herself fully in his eyes of icy blue.

It was all she could do to look at him, mouth parted slightly, as he gazed at her earnestly and spoke, "And besides all that, I can put in a word in the appropriate places. Although my word does not necessarily carry much weight in the *ton* these days, I guarantee that within a month, your door will be beaten down by a handful of noble clients…and, more importantly, by dozens of social climbers and wealthy would-be nobles hoping to chase the trend."

"Oh, Benedict, you…" Marie felt the room swirl around her head joyously. "That would be wonderful. With that kind of business coming to purchase the village's goods, there would be no need for the gang ever again!"

Benedict raised a finger sternly. "Mind you, you'll have to manage

your clients carefully. Highborn men and ladies are like children and must be taken care of in the way to which they are accustomed, or you'll never see them again."

"Oh, of course! I'll be sure to pay attention to all the proper courtesies and…and protocol so as not to offend any among the *ton*!"

He smiled, his eyes glittering in the dim firelight. "I meant more that you'll need to raise your prices far, far higher than seems appropriate. If a fair price is offered, they'll assume the goods are not for the upper class and will turn you away. Also, it's important to make them believe you only have very limited stock and are doing them a great favour by selling to them. The upper class is as enthusiastic about doing what they perceive their peers are doing as they are about denying that fact. Let them believe they are special and you'll have customers for life."

Marie nodded eagerly. She hoped she would remember this advice, despite the fact that she was having a hard time focusing her mind on anything beyond Benedict's touch.

"But you've something there with styles and protocols and all that," said Benedict, releasing Marie and pacing away with a thoughtful finger to his chin. "To sell to the *ton*, you must behave as though you are one of them. Make them believe you fit in among their society."

"And how…how is one to do that?" Marie asked, hands clutched in front of her. "I have certainly impersonated noble ladies at balls a fair number of times on gang business, but I know precious little about how to speak to them. Is there any advice you can give me?"

Benedict turned on his heel to face her, a wild smile on his face. "Your

impersonations are as good a place as any to begin! Let's see if you really learned how to dance." He stepped forward to her with hands outstretched, body held tall in a dancer's pose.

She glanced around at the ridiculous contrast of their setting to the usual atmosphere of a proper society dance. "Here?" Marie asked with a titter.

"Why not? It's good practice, and this place is no worse than any other society dance I've been to. I was thinking a quadrille to start—it's an older dance, for certain, but some of your customers will likely be of the previous generations."

"A quadrille? Without music?"

Benedict stepped forward and took her hands in his. "Miss Devons," he said with a grin. "No matter what anyone may tell you, all two people need for a dance, is one another."

Repeating her mock curtsy from earlier, Marie shared Benedict's smile and took his hands. He moved one foot, then the other, and Marie matched his movements with hesitation, then more confidently as their imaginary dance carried on.

"That's not bad," Benedict said in encouragement. "A little more practise and you'll be as talented as I am at a dance, not that that's saying very much."

"Then I'll have to simply do better than that," Marie laughed.

The two continued their dance with increasing enthusiasm, bobbing and dipping around the little ruined house that felt transformed into the grandest ballroom in the land. Marie felt her breath come faster as she pushed herself to keep up, and as her heart pounded harder, she felt as though she might float away up into the clouds. Their bodies moved as one, like one flesh, one mind, spinning and twirling together through space.

At last, the two came to a stop in unison, their breath mingling between them in glorious confluence. Marie felt a trickle of sweat run down her brow and had the desire to remove her jacket though it was a cold evening in this little house.

“How is my practise?” she panted.

“Not bad. Really, very good indeed,” Benedict said softly. Marie could feel the resonance of his deep voice shake her insides, and without thinking of what she was doing, she licked her lips and gazed into his eyes of purest icy blue. Something that she felt within herself she saw reflected back at her in those azure pools.

“You are too free with your compliments, my lord,” Marie said, unable to tear her eyes away from his.

“Modesty is no way to fit in with the *ton*,” Benedict laughed. Still, their fingers were laced together, and they glided across the floor together, their faces no more than an inch apart. “Besides, you wouldn’t say that if you knew just how many compliments I have been holding back.”

She swallowed. “Flatterer. If I didn’t know better, I’d suspect you were trying to steal another kiss.”

Their arms were pressed into one another now. Through her jacket and man’s shirt, Marie felt her breasts crushed into Benedict’s strong chest, his free hand resting achingly on her hip. “I’m glad you know better, then. If I weren’t possessed of so much self-control, I would have to tell you how lovely you are, how remarkable and intelligent and all the other things I am struggling to hold back lest you think ill of me.”

Her lips came closer to his, her eyes fluttering closed. She could feel the heat from his open mouth and was seized with a desire to know the taste of this man. “What is the opinion of a common thief worth, anyway?” Marie asked in a soft voice. “Why bother holding back at all?”

Benedict needed no further invitation. At these words, he brought their lips together in a collision that sent all the stars of heaven tumbling through Marie’s mind.

His fingers ran through her long black curls, teasing a gasp from somewhere deep at the bottom of Marie’s self. She shivered, feeling his strength as he held on to her tightly and she to him. Again, and again, their mouths came together, exploring one another’s deliciously alien geography as their hands sought something compelling as nothing else ever had been.

There was a flurry of movement. Clothing rained to the floor, and the two of them fell into the pile of fabrics on the floor before joining together, closer than they had ever dared possible, and taking flight somewhere wonderful.

Chapter 11

Beneath an Ancient Oak

The silent wooden guardian stood sentinel out in the green space between the Devons' house and the rest of the village. At this time of year, it was in magnificent form, with a canopy of bright, broad green leaves scattering shade down on the grass. From the Devons' window, it seemed as though all was well with the world.

But why do I still feel as though something terrible is going to happen? Amelia asked herself. She had stood at the window for nearly an hour by now, it seemed to her. Out on the green, she saw Marie, returned to them a few hours before and apparently uninjured. After a brief but joyous reunion with her sister and father, Marie had insisted on being put to work in the Devons' garden, barely taking the time to eat before stripping off her man's coat and going out to labour in the soil.

The previous night had been long and terrifying. Their father had returned in the dead of night, exhausted, with his news of the gang being routed by guardsmen. From what he said, most of the gang had managed to scatter and put enough distance between themselves and the guards to escape, as the guards had not been willing to stray too far from their employer.

Mark and whoever else had made it back to the village had stayed up for hours preparing a search party until first light, when it would be safe to ride the roads again. All Amelia's fear had crystallised as fury at her father, now that what she had dreaded for so long had apparently come to pass, but all that had dissipated in an instant when Marie and Benedict walked up to the house, dishevelled but unhurt, right before the search party could depart.

It was such a relief to have Marie come back in one piece, Amelia thought with a wistful smile. Yet all the same, Amelia kept noticing how hard her fingers were clenching the simple curtain at her side and how she kept having to stop herself from grinding her teeth to dust in her mouth.

What on earth is wrong with me?

Out in the garden, Marie looked up from her chore as though she heard something nearby. Amelia smiled, seeing her sister's face break open in an enthusiastic grin and call out to someone just out of view… then she gritted her teeth as the captive nobleman Benedict Carlton walked into view, greeting Marie with a smile as silly and bashful as Marie's own. Even from this distance, Amelia could see how they struggled to keep their hands at their sides rather than wrapped around one another.

She turned away from the window abruptly, muttering, "I don't know what the devil Marie thinks she's playing at, but she'd better forget about it. We've got plans, and she'd better not go back on her promise because of some silly flirtation."

Amelia returned to her kettle over the fire, which was nearly boiling. Tossing in a handful of the medicinal herbs Marie had picked the other day, Amelia stirred the solution as dark thoughts of resentment swirled in her head.

It may be nothing but a laugh for you, dear sister, but you aren't the one who has to nurse our wounded, Amelia thought, her brow wrinkling as all the night's worries bubbled forth as resentment. *How many times have I told you that you're going to be killed if you don't get out of that*

gang straight away?

A creak came at the back door, startling Amelia. From her place in front of her pot, she craned her neck over to see who was entering, though the slow, heavy footfalls alerted her before she saw her visitor's characteristic black coat and whiskered face.

"Hello, Will," Amelia said with only a whisper of dislike in her sympathetic voice. Will grunted a greeting and heavily fell into a seat near the fire. She approached him to inspect the injury on his upper arm. "How's the bandage? Does it still hurt like before?"

"I've had worse." Despite his bravado, Will hissed with pain as Amelia peeled back his bandage and inspected the bloody mess beneath.

"I know you have. I've bandaged some myself," Amelia said kindly. Wordlessly she moved to retrieve her tools and fresh bandages but was stopped in place by Will's strong hand on her forearm.

"Thanks, Amelia, but I didn't come for a new bandage. There's something else happening that's likely to wound us both." His eyes flitted out the window, where Marie and Benedict were still deep in conversation with one another.

"I don't know what you mean," Amelia grumbled, turning back to her previous task.

"Don't you?" Will's voice was harsh, and Amelia disliked how much his tone echoed the voice in her own head. "Seems to me those two are getting quite close. Maybe closer to a captive than any of us would

like."

Amelia sniffed, still not looking back at Will. "I hadn't noticed."

"Twaddle. The whole village can already see what's going on, and so can you, if you've glanced out this window even once. You're neither stupid nor blind, Amelia."

"Even if you're right, it's no concern of mine," Amelia continued as she shot Will a stern look. "Or of yours, Will Carpenter."

If Will was disarmed by the anger in her voice or her expression, he gave no sign, instead idly picking his teeth with a splinter of wood he drew from his pocket. "That's not the way I see it. It seems to me that if Marie is well and truly smitten with our beloved guest, that means nothing good for either of us."

Amelia snorted. "I tell you, it's not my business who she spends her time with. Marie is a grown woman and can make her own decisions."

"Even if those decisions mean your dream of opening a shop together end up getting forgotten yet again? I don't see a lot of room for shop-keeping or keeping promises in those dreamy eyes of hers."

Trepidation raked across Amelia's heart, halting her in her medical activity. *Marie wouldn't do that to me, would she?* she thought with a gulp. *Then again, she's already put off leaving the gang so many times already…*

“I still don’t see how it’s appropriate for me to interfere, even if I wanted to,” Amelia said softly into her bubbling pot. “But even if she and Benedict are as involved with one another as you bunch of fishwives seem to think, that hardly seems a problem. My sister may marry well, as I’ve told you a thousand times, and what could be better than marrying a duke?” Amelia laughed at the ridiculousness of the thought. “Wouldn’t that be a pretty sight! Knowing her, she’d still be wearing trousers to all her elegant balls and sneaking off back to Gower’s Grove with wagonloads of cash every other day. Doesn’t sound so bad as all that, really.”

“Who said anything about marrying? You don’t really think a duke’s son would marry a lowborn thief like Marie, do you?” Will chuckled, resting his feet on a low table. “You really are naïve, aren’t you, girl? Nobles like him have their fun and go back to their rich, proper wives. Can’t say I blame them, but do you really think she’ll be up to playing shopkeeper with you when she’s busy nursing the Duke’s son’s bastard babe? Or that any reputable sort of man would ever marry her after she’s already given herself to another?”

That stopped Amelia’s pleasant daydream in less than a heartbeat. *Marie wouldn’t…she couldn’t…*But Amelia knew from experience that men and women were more than capable of making ruinous decisions in fits of lust. She snuck a quick glance out the window. Even from all these yards away, the flush on Marie’s face was obvious as she laughed at something Benedict was saying.

“Of course, maybe he won’t even bother stringing her along like that,” said Will, leaning forward in his seat. “Maybe he’ll just have his fun and be off as soon as his daddy’s money comes in for the ransom.”

“I don’t—”

“But let’s say you’re correct and everything turns up like a right pretty fairy tale for Marie Devons,” Will said, pressing his advantage to interrupt Amelia. “Do you think the wife of a duke—the Duchess of Preston, aye—is going to be allowed to sneak around and get her hands dirty running a shop?”

“No idiotic rich society types will keep Marie from doing exactly what she wants to do,” Amelia protested.

“Oh, she’s a stubborn sort, for certain. I’ve no doubt she could scale down a window and get out into the city from time to time if she really wanted to.” Something sinister glinted in Will’s eye that lit a terrible fire at the pit of Amelia’s stomach. “But do you really believe that once she’s in the lap of luxury, she’ll still have any desire to bow and scrape and dirty her hands on your account? Just to keep a stupid promise she made when she was little more than a girl?”

The world swelled and swirled around Amelia’s head. She sat heavily on a nearby stool, hoping to keep herself from falling into a dead faint.

“Marie is true to her word, Will,” Amelia said soberly, wondering whom she was truly trying to convince. “She won’t endanger our plans or…or the village. Not for this man—not for any man.”

Will did not answer her, his eyes fixed on something out the window that Amelia could not see from her position. “Looks like you’ll get your chance to find out. She’s coming this way.”

Amelia felt a rush of shame. *What am I doing, talking about my sister’s private affairs with a cad like Will?* she thought, swallowing. “You’d best leave. I don’t think Marie would appreciate seeing you here at the

moment."

"Good idea," Will said, rising and slinking toward the back door with his eyes still trained on the window. "You'd best have a talk with her alone, like sisters. Tell her she'd best forget about her rich man and keep her mind on what's really important. I'll come back later and—"

"I don't much care what you do, Will Carpenter, so long as you leave this house in a hurry." Amelia was now standing between Will and the front of the house, her arms akimbo. He looked her in the eyes with as close to a plaintive expression as she had ever seen from the man, then ducked out the back door just as the front opened.

Lord help me, what do I do? Amelia thought, putting a hand to her chest in hopes of steadying her heart, which felt as though it might gallop right out from between her ribs.

"Oh, Ammy! I didn't know you were still in here."

Amelia turned with a tense smile plastered on her face, finding Marie sitting on a beat-up old armchair. Her hair was still unkempt, and her cheeks were blushing tremendously. Any hope Amelia had of avoiding the subject was dashed instantly; she had to know what was in Marie's heart.

"Marie," Amelia said carefully, taking a seat just across from her sister. "You and Benedict…" She took a breath, trying to clear her mind sufficiently to construct a coherent sentence. "I want you to be careful around him. I know how men can be, and I would hate to see you get your feelings hurt."

It was alarming how easily Marie laughed dismissively at this question, with what practised poise, she waved it away as though it was the most ridiculous thing that could be imagined. “Who, Benedict?” she laughed. “I guess that I shouldn’t be surprised. There’s nothing better to do in Gower’s Grove than to invent love stories where none exist. I should know. We’ve spun some lovely ones ourselves! But no, alas, our dear guest remains nothing more than our captive and conspirator, thanks to Father’s bizarre arrangement. I owe him my thanks for his help last night, but that’s all.”

Amelia stared at Marie, unblinking. “Not bad, sister. But let’s have the truth now, for a change.”

Marie’s bashful laughter betrayed only a tiny hint of frustration. “I suppose there really is no fooling you, is there? You know me too well.”

“I do. But more than that, the whole village has already seen the two of you laughing and tickling one another like a pair of lovesick kittens.”

Marie shrugged, her cheeks reddening still further with embarrassment though there was an unbothered smile on her face. “I should have known there’s no keeping secrets around here. Well, as long as everyone already knows….”

She reached out and took Amelia’s limp hands, her eyes alight with joy. “Oh, Amelia, he really is the most wonderful man! I know, I know, it doesn’t look right with him being our gang’s captive and everything, but you should hear his idea for taking care of the village! With his help, we shan’t have any need for the gang any longer. Father and I and all the rest—we shall be able to be safe and fed and no longer have to risk our lives senselessly.”

Marie sighed blissfully, still not noticing Amelia's mood. "And the way he makes me feel…Ammy, it's absolutely extraordinary! I know I thought he was a boor when we first encountered him, but over and over, he has proven himself kind as well as handsome." By now, her dreamy smile was wide enough she looked as though she might float away on a gust of wind. "I know it sounds preposterous, but I really think I am falling for Benedict!"

Cold fingers ran down Amelia's spine. *I cannot believe this is really my sister. Letting herself fall into such a delirious state over a man, and a nobleman and captive, no less?*

Marie withdrew her hands with a hurt expression, finally sensing Amelia's air of suspicion. "A wise woman once told me not to let my guard down, that a handsome face could hurt you worse than an ugly one," Amelia said icily. "At least, I once thought she was wise. Now I am not so sure."

Marie drew herself back, wounded. "Ammy, I…you don't…" she stammered.

"I mean, what do you think is going to come of this affair, Marie?" Amelia barked, pulling herself to her full height. "Even putting aside the fact that he's our captive—one who attacked you in the process of escaping, as I apparently have to remind you…."

"Amelia, listen to me, he—"

"No, Marie, I think I've listened to your daydreams and fairy tales

quite long enough. Now it's time for you to listen to a bit of sense, since you seem to have let Lord Elebury walk away with all of yours." Amelia licked her lips and continued. "You're not a stupid woman, Marie. Where do you think this is going to end? With your beloved Benedict renouncing his station to live in a hovel with you? With him returning triumphantly to London society with a wanted criminal as his bride? Or have you been too besotted with lust that you didn't even think of such things before giving yourself to him?"

Marie gaped at this accusation, her cheeks flushing as she blinked away tears. "I…."

Amelia smirked, simultaneously gratified that her guess had been correct and revolted with herself for laying into Marie so mercilessly. But she could not stop, not now. Will's words echoed in Amelia's ears, and before she could catch herself, she found herself repeating them. "You don't really think a duke would marry a lowborn thief like you, do you? You really are naïve, aren't you?"

Tears now flowed freely from Marie's eyes as her face grew red and pinched with anger. "I…" she said in a quiet voice, raising a finger into Amelia's face. "*I* am making a choice that will better my situation, Amelia, as well as the situation of the whole bloody village if you would bother to listen for once."

"Oho, so you're running about chasing the duke's son for *us*, then!" Amelia scoffed. "How generous of you."

"That's not fair and you know it," Marie seethed. "I know it might be hard to imagine when you're stuck up here cooking and taking care of the house all day, but some of us have considerably more dangerous work that needs doing! If you knew just what I have given up for the sake of keeping you and everyone else in this village alive these last few years—"

“Yes, of course, after all your work you *deserve* to lose yourself in a fantasy about being whisked away into a life of luxury by a handsome nobleman!” Now the sisters were a mere inch from one another’s faces, yet Amelia could feel her throat growing red and scratchy from bellowing so loudly. “I’m sorry to inconvenience you by reminding you of the fantasy you and I have both been working towards. We were going to improve our stations together, you and I, we were going to open our shop, at last, to take care of the village, and leave the gang life behind for good. Or had you forgotten?”

“Of course not! And that’s what Benedict—”

At this name, Amelia erupted in a noise of disgust. “*Benedict*! For God’s sake, can’t you see that man will tell you anything to get you to let your guard down? He’s already charmed you into giving him your virtue…Are you going to let him walk away with our future and the safety of the whole bloody—”

Before Amelia could finish, Marie turned and rushed out the door in a flurry of anger. She slammed it behind her roughly, leaving Amelia alone in the little house with nothing but her spite to keep her company.

Amelia was stricken by a sudden pang of regret. *That was cruel of me. I should go after her,* she thought, feeling the bitterness expelled from her body like poison. Sniffing back tears, she smelled smoke and realised the herbs she had had over the fire had long since burned, the water cooked away to acrid grey smoke.

“Bloody hell…” Amelia muttered, pulling the pot from the fire and sitting heavily on a chair to surrender to tears.

Chapter 12

The Road Ahead

Benedict had never known he could feel so deliriously happy. The knowledge that he could be possessed by such utter joy was almost enough to send him falling once more into a chasm of despair. *Has my every day before this one been nothing less than a terrible waste?* he wondered in a sombre moment. But then he was taken up once more into a pleasant whirlwind of remembered sensations.

There was that first kiss, Benedict thought, his head buzzing pleasantly at the recollection. *Even if it had been meant as a jape, the feelings that shot through me were unlike anything I'd experienced in my whole life.*

He spent more than an hour pacing back and forth in the empty storehouse that morning, though he could hardly complain of having the excuse to reminisce on the previous days in private. The sun arced across the sky, sunlight flooding through the dusty old building's wide windows, but Benedict might as well have been locked in a monk's cell for all the attention he paid the wider world.

And, of course, there had been other kisses since that first strangely passionate encounter in the cellar. *Atop the hill, when I nearly spoiled everything by acting like an arse. And the abandoned house…*

Benedict rubbed his chin, a blush spreading across his cheeks as he found himself grinning sheepishly. He was hardly unpractised in the arts of winning and wooing a woman, and many of his nights of carousing in the London underworld had concluded with him climbing

into bed with a young lady of inconsistent virtue. But for all his experience, something about Marie was wholly special, making him feel a greater and more powerful electricity run through his nerves than if she had been his first.

As in all other things, she is simply…different than any other woman I have ever known, he thought, shaking his head in amazement. *Different than anyone at all, in fact. There seems to be nothing boring or ordinary about her. And the more I know of her, the more I want to know.*

Yet with this reflection on the exhilarating nature of Marie's company came, as ever, the inevitable truth of his situation, like a shadow passing over the sun. Benedict looked around the storehouse, taking in the enterprise with a grim expression. *This is an impressive endeavour, for certain,* he thought, admiring the neatness of the ledger and the wide array of supplies piled high by the walls.

Then memory flashed back to the danger they had encountered the night before, the gunshots and the screams. *But no matter how clever these people may be, how dedicated to helping one another, they cannot continue like this much longer. Sooner or later, the gang will be found out, and then the whole village will be hanged as thieves and criminals. Mark, Amelia, Marie…the crown will not give a fig for their good intentions.*

Someone needs to do something about this, something that can last. Benedict sighed heavily, suddenly feeling very tired and old beyond his years. *I only wish it could be someone else.*

He sniffed, faintly perceiving something new and unpleasant suspended in the air of the storehouse. A strange memory visited Benedict then, interrupting his reverie. He frowned. It was a strange, slippery, half-remembered thing. All Benedict could clearly remember was that his father was there, and Benedict felt terribly, achingly sad.

The door swung open, and as Benedict looked to it in surprise, he half-expected to see his own father walk through the portal.

"Heard you were looking for me, lad."

Something cold wrapped around Benedict's heart and began to squeeze as Mark Devons half-staggered through the door. Benedict watched wordlessly as the older man softly belched and wiped his mouth with the back of his sleeve, grumbling curses as he found his way to a crate and lowered himself heavily onto it to face Benedict.

The smell of gin is strong on him today, stronger than usual, Benedict thought, feeling his shoulders hunch at the scent. *His eyes are sad, too, like Father's.* Indeed, though Mark Devons might be vastly removed from the Duke of Preston in most ways counted by society, in corruption and love of drink, the two men could almost be brothers. This sudden, drastic physical reminder of what awaited him was upsetting enough that Benedict had half a mind to abandon the proposition altogether.

No, he thought, setting his chin in determination. *This is too important to abandon. If Marie can face death, can give so much of herself to help those she loves, there's no reason I can't face my father to do the same.*

"If you'll excuse me, lad, I'm in the middle of recuperating from the gang's brush with death last night…" Mark belched once more, his eyes crossing as something foul was returned to the world from his fetid gut. "So if you'll speak plain and quick so I can get back to recuperating, I'd be much obliged to you."

After clearing his throat and steeling himself for the task, Benedict spread his arms wide and gave his more authoritative smile. “Mister Devons, you’ve accomplished a great deal here, overcoming incredible obstacles to save your family and friends. But you can’t carry on like this forever. Even if my father does pay the ransom you’ve asked, within a few months, you’ll be back to robbing and kidnapping whoever you can. And then where will they be?”

He gestured to Mark, then to the window facing the village green. “You’re a smart man, Mister Devons. You must realise that events like the ambush that surprised you last night are becoming more common as merchants and lords become better prepared for gang activity. Before long, someone is going to get careless, or their luck will run out. And I ask you again: when that inevitably happens, where will Gower’s Grove be?”

“Plain and quick, lad?” Mark asked humourlessly, his lips pressed into a thin line and a hand half-shading his eyes from the meagre sunlight.

Folding his hands behind his back, Benedict paced the floor as he continued to speak with great care. “My point is that this problem will never be fixed whilst the root cause endures. All the crime in the world won’t feed these people forever; if you want to truly help Gower’s Grove, you need to address your mistreatment by the Duke of Preston, and to do that, you’ll need me.”

Benedict stopped in place, then folded his arms and looked intently at Mark Devons. “Send me to London, Mister Devons. Let me speak with my father. He will listen to me, I promise you. Within a fortnight, you will receive all the help the village needs to keep itself alive, and you will be able to send your gang back to their farms and workshops to live their lives in safety and abundance.”

The barest hint of recognition passed before Mark’s eyes—a reaction

Benedict had learned first-hand presaged a dangerous temper. “That was not our deal, my lord,” Mark said quietly, looking down at his hands and beginning to clean his fingernails casually. “Besides, from what I heard, you and your father don’t have the best of relationships. If you had, I reckon either the ransom or the army would’ve already been here.”

Benedict winced. “Be that as it may, I cannot see any other way out of the situation you and the rest of the gang have found yourselves in.” A rush of emotion pumped through his veins, flushing his words with a creak of sadness. “It takes a strong man to acknowledge that he can’t hold the entire world on his shoulders, Mark. If not for yourself, then do it for your daughters. Give them a chance to live their lives as good, honest women instead of amid secrecy and danger.”

Mark blinked twice, thrice. His eyes rolled up to the ceiling as if searching for some wisdom in the rafters, and Benedict felt his heart tremble in his ribcage before the old thief said, as easily as if agreeing to a stroll in the park, “All right, then.”

Benedict felt his breath catch in his throat. “Oh! I–indeed?” he stuttered, immediately cursing himself for the stupidity of his question.

The old gang leader lurched to his feet and chuckled as he approached Benedict and put an arm around his shoulders, walking the pair of them out the door and into the village. “Why not? Lord knows my own plan was no less hare-brained an idea. Putting aside your heroics in coming to the aid of my daughter—thank you once again for that, by the by…”

Benedict blushed, remembering what had transpired in the wake of the ostensible heroics.

“And as far as I can see,” Mark continued, “your plan is just as ridiculous as mine, but if you speak true, it has a better chance of succeeding in the long run. We’ll see if your old dad doesn’t listen to reason for a change. If not, we can always just continue with what we’ve been doing. It’s worth a roll of the dice, at any rate.”

“I’m glad to hear we agree. I can leave immediately.”

Mark nodded, his arm still firmly around the younger man’s shoulder. “A little hard riding should get you there in a few hours, but you’ll have to be patient. The gang’s still in disarray after last night, after all. Give us until tomorrow morning to assemble whatever horses and supplies you might need, and then you and Marie can be off.”

“M–Marie?” Benedict asked in bafflement. “Why…I thought I would….”

“Thought I’d let you just gallop off to London on your own?” Mark chuckled. He stuck a wrinkled but still strong finger into Benedict’s chest and pulled him in closer. “You’re a good lad, Benedict, but I’m not as big a fool as you’d hope. You’re still a captive of the Devons gang, and I won’t send you out without one of our own to keep an eye on you.”

“I…yes, I see,” Benedict said. His mind raced with the possibilities that might present themselves on a journey to London with Marie. He suspected Mark was playing some manner of game with him, but was so dazzled by the idea of spending more time alone with her that he could barely assemble his thoughts into a clear sentence. “So…Marie and I, then. We will go to London together,” he babbled. “Fine, yes.”

“You’ve no objections to travelling with Marie in particular, I trust?”

“Oh, no, sir, of course not!”

Mark fixed him with a look, his characteristic twinkle glistening in his eye. “You’re sure, lad? No designs to seduce a second member of my gang, have you? If you do, I’d stay away from Jeb if I were you. The man’s been known to bite, and he talks in his sleep something awful.”

Benedict tripped over his own feet, nearly tumbling headlong onto the ground in front of the passing villagers, but caught himself just in time. Blushing tremendously and feeling a trickle of sweat run down his temple, Benedict turned back to look at Mark, his hands up in protest. “Sir, I–I…I’m sure I don’t…your daughter and I…just what are you implying that—?”

Mark broke into a loud, rolling chuckle at this, putting one hand on his considerable belly. “You nobles never cease to amaze me. To think that a man and a woman need a dozen lords’ and grandfathers’ permission to do what every one of God’s creatures does as natural as breathing out and in!” Something evil returned to his gaze for a moment, as he considered Benedict carefully. “You don’t mean to insult my intelligence by denying it, do you?”

“I…” Lightheaded, Benedict glanced around them. The knowing smiles on the faces of the passers-by seemed to confirm what Mark had implied—the whole bloody village had already deduced that he and Marie had fallen for one another. “No, sir,” he said at last in a quiet voice tinted with shame.

The older man laughed once more and continued walking back toward

the house, shaking his head in disbelief. “Just keep to your word about helping the gang and don’t put a bastard in her belly if you can help it, lad,” he said casually over his shoulder. “And if you do wrong by her, I’ll gut you with my own two hands.”

* * *

Benedict felt, rather than heard Marie’s tears, at first. When he returned from his conversation with Mark, Amelia had snapped at him that Marie had run off to another nearby vacant house for a while. He’d known something must have happened. As Mark entered his family home and began to issue directions to pack for the trip to London, it was all Benedict could do not to sprint to the house to which he was directed, fearful Marie might be in some sort of trouble.

When he reached the house, he pushed his way in without knocking. “Marie?” he called, only barely remembering to close the door behind him. A heavy feeling hung over the front room of the house, a palpable sort of trepidation that was heavy though the room was empty.

Benedict rushed through to the back of the house and discovered Marie looking up at him with tears in her eyes. She was sitting on an old straw bed, dressed no longer in her shirt and trousers but in a flattering if simple dun-coloured dress, and her cheeks were red and streaked with wetness.

“Marie, what happened? Are you all right?” Even as he asked the words, she was rising from the bed, and he was at her side. Their arms found purchase around one another. She clutched his shoulders as he brought her close to him, feeling her shuddering breaths wet his jacket.

“What is it, Marie?” Benedict said gently. His mind raced, searching desperately for what might be the matter. “Is it—?”

“Oh, it’s nothing. Nothing at all, really.” He held her close, and though the sobs that wracked her body gave lie to her words, Benedict waited patiently for her to regain her speech.

At last, she did, and when she looked up at him, she had stars glinting in her eyes. Her hair was a tangled mass plastered to the sides of her mouth by her tears, and her eyes were nearly as red and streaked as her cheeks. Benedict felt something soaring within him at the sight of her face. Though she was in pain, she was still somehow the most beautiful sight he had ever seen.

“It’s Amelia, she—” Marie broke off into a choked sob once more, but before Benedict could pull her into a comforting embrace, she swallowed her misery and looked away with a shuddering sigh. “We fought, she and I. It was terrible. Both of us said some very cruel things, and…” She looked up at him, tears welling up in her eyes once more. “It was awful, Benedict. She is so very important to me, and I hate it when we fight like this.”

They held one another quietly in the still old house. Licking his lips, hoping to find some answer to the problem, Benedict asked, “What was it you were fighting about, exactly, that was so very upsetting?”

“I…would prefer not to talk about it,” Marie said softly into his shoulder.

As they gently rocked back and forth, seeking comfort from their distress in one another’s presence, Benedict felt a flare of something

sinister within his belly. *Why wouldn't she tell me what's bothering her?* it asked in a serpent's voice. *Is she keeping secrets from me?*

This voice was familiar to Benedict, he realised. Something about it plucked the same string within him as the flickering sense of wrongness. But as quickly as it had occurred to him to be suspicious, he dismissed this impulse without a second thought. *Just with her presence, she makes it easy to be a better man,* Benedict reflected, awestruck by the realisation.

Benedict sniffled, and he realised in wonder that tears were now flowing freely down his own cheeks as well. Marie looked up at him expectantly, her face framed by her intricate black curls as her full, sensuous lips parted attractively.

"I…have never wanted anything in my life, Marie," he said, the words echoing up from a well deep within him. Benedict did not understand what he was saying, but he could no more stop himself, than he could hold back the tide. "Nothing I could ever attain, at least. I wanted my mother not to have died. I wanted to end each day as soon as it began, and I hastened it as much as I could with drink and gambling. But there has never been anything in the world that I truly wanted for my own."

He looked into her impossibly deep grey eyes, seeing all the pathos that he felt reflected in their profound darkness. "That's all different now. I want something now, want it so desperately, more than a drowning man wants for air. I want to protect you from ever feeling sad again. I want to keep you safe from all the miseries of the world and whatever lies beyond."

Benedict moved a hand from her waist and brushed it delicately against her pointed chin. "I love you, Marie. With all my heart."

As he spoke these words, Benedict felt himself suddenly become empty, as if he had poured out the entire contents of his soul into the air between them. This void was instantly filled with a powerful surge of the terrible flickering wrongness that nearly knocked him to his knees.

She will never love you the same way, it seemed to say. *You are a fool and a bounder, and your love would never bring her anything. What would she ever want with a drunken lout like you? Best you had never said it at all, and fled back into a bottle where you nearly succeeded at drowning yourself once before.*

But it lasted less than a heartbeat. Even as the world around him swelled and threatened to go dark, a beacon was lit right within his arms, bright as the sun.

“I love you too, Benedict.” Marie looked as amazed at the sentiment as he was, but their eyes locked and they smiled as one, sweet tears of recognition and relief painting their faces. “I love you,” she repeated, overawed by the enormity and the unstoppable truth of the sound.

“I love you,” he echoed.

And then, clearly, in his mind’s eye, Benedict felt that awful flickering visitation disappear into nothingness, blowing away like ash in the wind. He knew in that moment that it would never return to trouble him, for he had found as pure and unyielding a good as this glorious world would ever produce.

His lips were on hers, as hers were on his—closer, now closer and

harder, and he felt the heat swell in her breast as his own fire burned brighter and hotter than an inferno. Their fingers interlaced, clutching to one another ever so tightly, as though to prevent the other from flying away on angelic wings.

"I love you, Benedict," Marie said once more. It was like a chant, a mantra that poured forth from her like a slow, hot breath. "I love you. I love you." With each repetition, Benedict felt their mutual desire grow, and in the eternal moments of aching, longing absence in which their lips were parted, he brought his mouth to the soft skin across her long, elegant neck. His lips wandered lower, lower along her creamy skin, and each time she said those three words, he instinctively understood her deepening meaning.

"I love you." *Don't stop.*

"I love you." *Lower, please, lower.*

"I love you." *Run your fingers through my hair.*

Each of these exhortations Benedict indulged without hesitation, gradually transmuting her words from coherent thoughts into breathless moans of desire. A rush of pride arose in Benedict's chest, as with the slightest movement of his hand, with but a careful exhalation onto the softness of her shoulder, he granted her a euphoric boon that threatened to rip away her sense and leave her an animalistic creature of lust.

He pulled aside the neckline of her dress, a bit more roughly than he meant to, exposing the delicate flesh that heaved with her breath just above her full bosom. Marie gasped, her hands flying to Benedict's, and as he saw an ecstatic smile come across her face, Benedict

surrendered to his bestial hunger and pulled her dress open further.

Still closer they pulled one another, and closer still, their hands crawling over and through their clothes even as the garments were pulled aside and disappeared somewhere unimportant.

Benedict's large, strong hand found Marie's breast, her nipple peaked with anticipation, and she released a low, desirous moan in response. In equal measure, Benedict felt her delicate fingers blindly seek to unlace his own trousers, a shudder coming to her body as her skin brushed against his burgeoning masculine hardness.

They were on the bed then, their breaths coming as one as their hearts beat together. There was desperation echoing in Marie's soft, longing utterances, and the meaning behind the steady repetition of her pledge to him and the gods above was plain as day.

Take me. Make love to me. Now, this instant, hurry!

"I love you, Marie," Benedict answered, his voice suddenly quieter, almost sombre. Her eyes fluttered open with concern, but Benedict met them with a smile as he stayed poised above her, his muscles holding him steady though her fingers were dug into his back with all her might.

Wordlessly, he dipped his head lower, blazing a path of kisses and embraces along her shoulder down to her full, heaving breasts, and lower still, past her waist and belly to lands even she had never explored save in her most secret of ministrations. Benedict's fingers laced through her dark, downy hair, delicately spreading her legs open as he kissed his path down to the very essence of her womanhood.

“Oh!” Marie cried, her hands flying above her head and clenching into fists. Speech was now entirely beyond her faculties, all sense of hurry or urgency gone.

We have all the time in the world, Benedict whispered to her without a sound, his tongue painting an exquisite landscape across her body that scattered a thousand brilliant stars before her darkened eyelids. *This is all that will ever matter.*

And *I love you*, over and over again as the day passed into night and the heavens came down to earth upon their heads.

Chapter 13

A Parting of Paths

‘I’m sorry to inconvenience you by reminding you of the fantasy you and I have both been working towards.’

Though it was within sight of her family home, Marie had never noticed the house where she now watched Benedict sleep and counted the cracks in the darkened ceiling above them. But sitting on the side of the bed and gazing out the streaked glass window, she found she could not tear her eyes away from the Devons’ home.

‘We were going to improve our stations together, you and I, we were going to open our shop at last, going to take care of the village and leave the gang life behind for good.’

It looked so quiet, so small and peaceful in the dead of night like this. But on the upper floor of the house, just through the black window, she could barely make out from this distance, she knew Amelia was lying awake just as she was.

Knowing her, Amelia was tossing and turning, a scowl on her face, as though she could wrestle sleep into herself by refusing to acknowledge the troubles that kept her so restless. Marie remembered many a terrible night when their mother was falling ill, when neither she nor Amelia had gotten a wink of sleep, but her stubborn sister had never deigned to close her eyes or acknowledge her weariness on the following morning.

‘Or had you forgotten?’

Marie sniffed back tears that threatened to bubble over and wash her into despair once more. She *had* forgotten, she realised. Of late, it had been because of Benedict, but in truth, when she was accosting corrupt nobles or dressing in fancy gowns to sneak into public balls, Marie had rarely, if ever, spared a thought for her promise. Over and over, she had pushed aside her vow to Amelia, and now, after their fight a few hours before, the consequences of that delay were more apparent than ever.

I had never thought she was capable of speaking so callously, so cruelly, Marie thought with a sigh, running a finger along the dusty windowsill. *She never was before, really, I know her that well…but she has changed without my realising it. I have been away so long that Amelia has grown into an adult woman.*

The thought that Marie had neglected her sister’s maturation over the last few years was sad enough on its own, but she knew that it was more tragic than just that. *She has become bitter, hasn’t she? And who could blame her? She never pledged herself to a life of crime with the gang as I did when Father needed me. All she knows nowe is secrecy and fear and danger. She has counted on me to deliver her from this life, and I have let her down over and over.*

Marie started at a sound that came from just over her shoulder. She turned and saw it had been a soft grunt from Benedict as he shifted his weight in the bed, still fast asleep. A smile came to her lips as her eyes roved over his sleeping form—the peaceful expression that rested on his brow, the relaxed slope of his broad shoulders, the shape of one strong, athletic arm curled neatly under his head. To think that a man she had first thought her enemy could now fill her with such feelings of affection and peace.

All that worry and strife is over now, Marie thought. *Tomorrow, Benedict and I will return to London. With a little effort, he will convince his father to help Gower's Grove. The gang will be a thing of the past, and before long, Amelia will have nothing to worry about. Benedict and I will marry, and Amelia will be free to seek her own happiness.*

Marie blinked, curling the corners of her lips up in a shadow of a smile. *It's all happening so perfectly. I love this man, and he loves me and will solve all our problems.* Her heart thumped mightily with each thought.

Everything will be wonderful. There is nothing to worry about any longer.

The words echoed as they spilt into the black chasm that lay open somewhere horrible deep within her.

Then why do I still feel so ill at ease?

She looked back out the window, hoping to chase away the tears that welled up within her. The way Benedict had spoken of never having wanted anything—she had no shortage of sympathy for his position, that was for certain.

But somehow, she felt all the sadder knowing that she had wanted something for herself and for Ammy, something she had worked for and promised over and over again, and now was ready to give up entirely once something else came along. Even now, deep and abiding as her love for this man was…could she really abandon Amelia yet again, right on the cusp of living up to her word?

Love forever with Benedict is a more wonderful future than any I could have ever hoped for, Marie thought, a lump forming in her throat. *But how is it any different from running away from my obligations? Have I worked so hard for so many years just to let a rich man walk in and carry me away from my problems? Away from Amelia and the future we wanted?*

Marie rolled the questions around in her mind over and over again, her finger scratching a deep furrow into the old wood on the sill. *Scratch all you want, girl,* she told herself with a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach. *You know you've already found your answer.*

If only the answer she had uncovered were not such a cruel one. *However wonderful it may be, love must wait—first, you must take care of those who are counting on you, starting with your family. Mother would expect nothing less, and I cannot begin letting her down now.*

"Marie."

She wiped away her tears, forcing a smile onto her face before turning back to look at Benedict. But she could not continue this pretence for longer than a heartbeat. The knowing sympathy in his eyes erased her strong façade in an instant.

"What's the matter?" Benedict asked, leaning up and resting his head on his fist.

Despite the terrible resignation she still held in her mind, Marie could not help but laugh bitterly at the hand fate had dealt the both of them. *Just as I find a man who seems to truly understand me, who is*

ready and willing to give me everything I have ever desired…now I must tell him that what I want, he cannot give me?

"I…I have been thinking, Benedict," she said, leaning toward him and letting her fingers tousle his hair affectionately. She drank in a breath of his musky, masculine smell, closing her eyes to savour the sensation whilst it lasted.

"Thinking? You? There's something new," Benedict joked. They shared a laugh, and he craned his neck back to kiss her sweetly on the lips.

"It feels as though it's been ages since you suggested your solution to the village's problem," Marie said in a heavy voice. "I can scarcely believe it's only been a little more than a day."

Benedict nodded sagely. "I understand a day with me can seem like an eternity to some. I understand it's something to do with how terribly wonderful I am."

Marie playfully thumped him on the shoulder with her small, calloused fist, enjoying the feeling of his tensed muscle under her hand, and he laughed and writhed in mock agony at the blow. "Will you stop being wonderful for just a moment and let me finish?"

She drew in a breath and let it out slowly. *Out with it, girl. Get this said; the longer you hold it in, the longer it will only hurt you both.*

"Everything you've pledged to do to help the village is so wonderfully generous," Marie said carefully, unable to meet Benedict's eyes. "But

to be honest, it fills me with trepidation to think that everything—my family, Gower's grove, my own future—relies entirely upon you and your largesse. I have been planning to open this shop for many years now, and I don't know if I would be able to live with myself if I was living off your family's fortune instead of finally making an honest try of things on my own."

A flash of pain crossed Benedict's face, and for a second, Marie's resolution wavered. "I thought we were happy together, that you would return to London with me and we would begin living our lives together. I see I must have been under some misapprehension, though. Just…what is it you're asking of me, Marie?" he said after a long, tender silence.

"Nothing," Marie answered. "That's the point, Benedict. I love you, but I won't have you do everything for me. My life is mine to live, not yours. I can't throw away my freedom and become a wife when I have yet to live for myself as a woman."

"You'd leave behind the love we found to satisfy your pride." It was a statement, not a question, and there were thorns in his voice now. "More than that, you'd throw the village to the wolves by the same token?"

"Of course not!" she protested. "From what you told me, I still think you have the right of it, and so does Father. Things will only change when we are no longer squeezed dry by a lord who does not care whether we live or die." She took a breath, trying to force back tears. "But I can't marry you, Benedict. Not now, at least. You've kept your word to my father, despite all. I need to have the chance to do the same."

Another prolonged silence filled the little room. Benedict rolled onto his back, his hands folded behind his head. His breathing grew

shallow, and after a moment, he was so quiet Marie wondered if he had fainted away.

"What will you do then, Marie?"

Marie choked back a sob at the change in Benedict's voice. Gone was all the affection and tenderness he had shown her. It was as though he were speaking to his captor again. *I do not want our love to be spoilt. Lord, why must I choose between my own happiness and keeping my promises?*

Hesitantly she answered, "I will open a shop to sell the village's wares, just as we talked about. Only in London, not here in Gower's Grove. That way, I can still be close to my family, once Amelia comes to join me when the shop is open and doing steady business, whilst still making inroads in London society, as you helped me prepare for yesterday."

Benedict did not answer her. Trying to ignore the cold feeling creeping over her, Marie continued in as excited a voice as she could summon, "I intend to leave the gang right away and to open the shop as soon as possible. After things are sorted with you and your ransom, I will ask Father to lend me a few carts to carry that cabinet of Robert's and whatever else is ready here in the village, and I should be able to use one of the gang's houses to begin selling them. And then… well, we will see if I can finally live up to my potential."

The potential I did not know I possessed until you came into my life, she wanted to add, but she bit her tongue lest she hurt him further.

"And what does that mean for us? To start, I imagine you won't be accompanying me to London on the morrow after all, will you?"

Benedict sounded far away now, though he was still within reach. Marie longed to reach her hand out to him, to caress his shoulder and press herself against him, to comfort him in his pain…but she knew she could not.

Marie forced herself to keep breathing, though, in truth, she felt she would rather sink into a grave beneath her feet. “No, I think not. I’ll ask Father to send someone else whilst I make ready to start my shop with Amelia. You and I…Well, remember that our paths have crossed more times than anyone would have thought,” she said softly. “I will be in London, as will you. Our paths will cross again before long. And by the time they do, I’m sure we will have each of us accomplished our goals, so we can resume walking the same path once more.”

There was nothing but the sound of crickets echoing in through the window, singing their lonely summer song. Marie laid her head against the pillow, still assiduously avoiding any contact with Benedict out of fear of provoking him to further hurt or despair by her actions.

If you still will even want to cross paths with me again, she thought, misery welling up from her soul. *If I have not spoilt everything with my late decision.*

“Well,” Benedict sighed at last, affecting a light-hearted tone. “Knowing you, it shan’t be long at all until you’ve achieved what you mean to. Like as not, we will be crossing paths with one another and ready to pick it up again before this winter, even.”

Marie had not known him long, but she knew him more than well enough to detect the falseness in his saccharine tone. When he rolled onto one side and wrapped an arm around her, pulling her into a warm embrace, she tried to accept this intimate yet still distant touch as it was offered, willing herself to enjoy these final moments with

Benedict before they parted again for an indeterminate amount of time—not forever, she forced herself to remember, just for a short while.

This is for the best, she thought, feeling a tear roll down her reddened cheek. *Love is worth waiting for—as long as it will be good enough to wait for me.*

Chapter 14

A Long-Awaited Homecoming

The Preston estate was smaller than Benedict remembered, somehow. It was still dominated by an enormous stone house on a vast plot of land on the edge of one of London's fashionable districts…but in Benedict's years of absence, it had been built larger and ever more imposing in his mind even as it had grown older and dustier in actuality.

Now, standing before its wrought-iron gates, Benedict could not help but notice how the ivy had grown out of control on the monstrous stone edifice. Bits and pieces of the masonry looked to be falling off, and the road between the gate and the main house was tangled and overgrown with weeds. Even looking past the disrepair the manor had fallen into, Benedict still felt it was so much smaller and more pathetic than he remembered.

Father…Benedict pushed aside a surge of sorrow. He had to keep his mind clear, to focus on the task at hand rather than wallow in the sad memory of what had once been a happy home. That was what had carried him so far into vice and venality in the first place, after all.

"This had better be worth our time," Will grumbled, arms folded.

"It will be," Benedict replied grimly. "Just keep silent and let me take care of things."

“Well, go ahead and take care of things, then. Can’t see what we’re accomplishing by waiting around here.”

Benedict rolled his eyes. “Yes, gaoler, whatever you say.”

Will sneered at him but gave a curt nod and fell in line behind Benedict as he pushed at the gate, swinging it open on noisy hinges that were thick with rust. Seeing no one around to escort them in, the pair walked through the gates toward the house.

Benedict could not help but cast a wary eye to Will, who seemed to be sizing up the grounds for what he was certain was some nefarious criminal purpose. *Damn you, Mark, for sending this one along. If only he’d trusted me to take care of this on my own.* Then a sadder thought still, *If only Marie hadn’t decided we needed to part ways so abruptly. I cannot imagine what she was thinking, to turn aside from our love just after we had found one another…*

A distant voice echoed from the green stones of the manor, angry and increasingly out of breath as it drew nearer. “Stop, there! Here, clear off, you, or I’ll call the—”

Benedict turned to see a pudgy man stumbling towards them, his jowls shaking with the effort. The man stopped a few yards away, just as Benedict met his eyes, and drew in a gasp, his face turning white as though he had seen a ghost.

“M–Master Benedict!” the man exclaimed.

“Hello, Lionel,” said Benedict warmly, extending a hand to the old driver’s shoulder. Lionel recoiled before feeling the solidity of Benedict’s touch. He eagerly shook Benedict’s free hand. “It’s good to see you again.”

“And you, my lord,” Lionel said with an emotional sniff. “We heard you’d been…” The driver shot a suspicious look at Will, who did not respond to this wordless accusation save with a crack of his bony knuckles. “We heard you’d been kidnapped by brigands, sir. We all feared the worst for you,” Lionel said in a forced whisper.

“Yes, well, we’re working that out at present,” Benedict replied carefully. He looked around exaggeratedly at the dilapidated grounds. “What happened here? Where is everyone? Why are you doing Mister Hollings’ duties? Father doesn’t have you guarding the gate as well as driving, does he?”

Lionel shrugged heavily, still not releasing Benedict’s hand. “His Grace doesn’t have much need of a driver of late. But he’s been good enough to keep me on in other employment, at least.” A look of trepidation crossed the driver’s face. “You must go to speak with him, my lord. He’ll…I’m sure he’ll want to know you’re safe and home.”

Will he, now? Benedict’s uncertainty must have been plain on his face, because his family’s long-suffering driver nervously huffed and rushed ahead to open the door to the house for them, muttering half-articulated platitudes about paternal affection.

Trying to dismiss the feeling that he would sooner put his head into a lion’s jaws, Benedict slowly and purposefully followed Lionel, giving the man an affectionate pat on the shoulder as he entered the house he had been cast out of four long years before.

“Er, my lord…that is, well, your friend…or companion, perhaps…?”

Benedict turned back, grateful for the delay in his reunion with his father. Standing ramrod straight with his back against the door, Lionel nervously jerked his head in the direction of Will. He smiled knowingly, seeing red pass before the thief’s narrow eyes.

“Mister Carpenter will be waiting in the salon facing the garden,” Benedict said, his eyes trained on Will.

“Bugger that,” said Will, folding his arms. “I’m not just leaving you to go where you please. Devons told me not to let you out of my sight. No telling what you might get up to, he said.” His forearm muscles bulged threateningly as he planted his feet, indicating his unwillingness to do as he was bid.

Lionel looked positively apoplectic at this breach of decorum. His chin quivering, he looked to Benedict with wide eyes as a handful of other servants hovered about nervously.

“This is how it has to be, Will,” Benedict sighed. “If I don’t speak with my father alone, we needn’t have bothered coming at all. Even on my own, we’ll be lucky if he does not throw me out on my ear as soon as I walk in. With you by my side, he may well call the guard on us.”

Will’s eyes narrowed. *‘That’s not what you told Devons,’* his gaze said unmistakably.

“I’ve given you my word, Will. I know that may not mean much to

you, but I would not go back on my promise to Mister Devons. Or to Marie."

This last point seemed to strike Will like an arrow in the gut. His eyes flashed with anger, and the nearby servants drew back in fear of what might happen. After a moment of tension, though, the man finally shrugged and began walking in the direction Benedict indicated, shaking his head and muttering something vile.

"See to my companion's needs, please," Benedict said to the slew of maids that looked on anxiously. And without waiting to see if they still followed his instructions in this house, he plodded down the corridor on feet as heavy as lead.

I'm not sure what exactly I had expected, Benedict thought, looking around him in the mammoth study with wonder. *Perhaps I thought by now it would be a sepulchre in truth rather than just in atmosphere, or that I would enter to find bats roosting among the bookshelves.*

In actuality, the cavernous room looked exactly as it had four years earlier. Some of the piles of papers had migrated from one desk to another, and Benedict thought he detected a different label on the open wine bottle he saw on the massive writing desk, but other than that, he might as well have walked back into the same afternoon when he had left.

Even Father seems not to have moved, Benedict thought with a grimace, seeing the older man slouched in an armchair, looking to have fallen asleep or passed out an indeterminate amount of time earlier. *Though he looks ten years older than I remember…*

Screwing his courage to the sticking place, Benedict drew close across

the carpet, trying to move quietly so as not to disturb the sleeping man. He needn't have worried. Benedict came within a few yards of his father without the Duke stirring at all. Unsure how to proceed, eventually, he resorted to clearing his throat loudly. This had the desired effect. The Duke's eyes shot open, red and filmy, and he barked something inarticulate in surprise before looking around in bewilderment for the source of this interruption.

"Hello, Father," Benedict said, swallowing. He could not help but feel a bit silly at speaking such a banal greeting. If Benedict had feared his reappearance would provoke his father into an immediate rage, however, he was gratified if not surprised to see the Duke hardly react to seeing his son before him again.

"Benedict?" The Duke's eyes blinked again and again, yet from the wide, unseeing whites, Benedict got the impression he did not see what was right before him. The Duke reached out a gnarled hand gingerly as if to touch the vision before him and see if it was truly made of flesh and blood.

"Yes, Father. It's me," Benedict answered quietly before his father could make contact with him.

A glint of anger crossed the Duke's eyes, and in a flurry of movement, the older man was on his feet and pacing across the carpet toward the curtains. "Preposterous. Ridiculous," the man grumbled. He held open the dark shade and peered out the window briefly, recoiling at the sunlight, then dropped it back into place and paced the other way with his eyes fixed on some indeterminate spot on the floor. "No-good wastrel, son of mine. Ingrate. Up to something foul, no doubt, always has been."

"Father, I'm right here if you want to tell me something," Benedict said, struggling to keep his rising anger from his voice. "Or if you

would rather be left alone to grumble about me in peace, I can simply leave again and—"

"Leave!" his father barked, looking at him with wide eyes. For a second, Benedict was unsure if this was a command, but then the Duke laughed bitterly and resumed pacing, wagging a finger in the air as if he had picked up on some arcane clue.

"Oh, yes, you're always off somewhere, aren't you? I've heard the stories, you know, I always do. You may think you keep your gambling and drinking and…and *depravity* from your poor, beleaguered father, but I always hear just what it is you've been getting up to, despite your insultingly fantastic letters."

Benedict's eyes followed his father's dismissive gesture to a tall pile of papers that were spilt all over the surface of a table in the corner of the study. *Has he kept all of my letters all this time?* Benedict thought, unsure of how he felt about this realisation. *I assumed he would have burned them or torn them up in a fit, assuming he bothered to read them at all.*

"And what is it that's brought you back now?" snapped the Duke. "Here to beg for another raise in your allowance, I expect. As though I don't pay all your debts to the scum you call friends already."

Benedict closed his eyes and tried to silence the voice that cried at him that this was a mistake, that he ought never have come. "That's not it, Father," he said through gritted teeth. "It's about the gang that abducted me. I've come on a mission of mercy, escorted by one of them here to speak with you about—"

"Oho, that's right, you've been *kidnapped*!" the Duke crowed, his eyes

growing wilder still, his hair a bird's nest of oily grey locks. "Some kidnapping, that you're free to come beg your father for money as soon as you lose interest in the whole business. So you've grown bored of this latest ploy for attention, have you? What's the matter, my boy, didn't get your 'ransom' money quick enough?"

"That's not…Father, it was my idea to—" Benedict protested.

But his father was in no state for listening now. Pulling himself closer still to Benedict's face, close enough for Benedict to see the flecks of spittle flying from his untrimmed moustache, the Duke continued his onslaught. "I knew you were up to something as soon as I got the note, Benedict, but I certainly expected you to keep up the ruse longer than a few days! Your idleness truly sinks to lower depths with every passing day, doesn't it?"

"Sir, you don't know what—"

"Just so typical of you, really! You get bored so easily, and without seeing something through, you move on to the next enterprise without seeing anything through. A trait you have in common with your wicked mother, as you may—"

"Father, *listen* to me, damn you!"

This pulled the Duke up short. He drew back, recoiling in the manner of a circus beast fearing his trainer's whip. Realising he was raising his hand in what might be perceived as a threatening manner, Benedict folded his hands behind his back but spoke quickly lest he yield his opportunity.

“Everything you’re saying about me…” Benedict trailed off. He sighed heavily, looking down in shame. “You’re right. About all of it. I have shamed our family and done wrong to your name, Father, and all I can do now is apologise.”

The Duke looked to be frozen in his position, only his bloodshot eyes showing any sign of life. His breathing shallow, his mouth curled in fear, Benedict lowered his shoulders and assumed what he hoped would be taken as a contrite posture. “I’m sorry, Father,” Benedict said solemnly. “I know you and I have had our disagreements, but you deserve better behaviour from your son regardless of my feelings.”

He looked up, feeling tears well up behind his eyelids. “I have done many of the things you accuse me of,” Benedict intoned. “I have lived a life of sin and idleness for years. I have wallowed in drink…” He resisted the urge to point out that by all appearances, the Duke rivalled his son for this particular vice. “I have also gambled, caroused, and consorted with unsavoury men.”

Now Benedict pulled himself straighter, looking into his father’s fearful eyes with determination. “I intend to atone for all of my sins, Father. But I will not be judged for my actions these last several days during this episode of my captivity. I have done far better than you have raised me to, and you shall hear every word of what I have to say on that subject. Nor will I allow you to judge me for Mother’s actions. In fact, I think it better you avoid mentioning her again for a time if we are to really have a conversation like civilised men.”

The Duke’s chest barely moved. After a long, painful silence, his posture relaxed, and as the older man drew himself straight, Benedict thought for the first time that he really did resemble the loving father Benedict remembered from his childhood.

“Agreed,” said the Duke tersely. He turned and shuffled slowly toward the massive writing desk, asking over his shoulder, “Will you take a drink with me?”

Unsure whether he was more prepared to continue defending himself or to berate his father for indulging himself still further in drink, Benedict finally choked out an affirmative grunt. “Thank you,” he added, taking the proffered glass.

As he sipped the rich red wine, he carefully examined his father over the rim of the glass. Though the Duke drained half his glass in one swallow, it looked as though his temper had passed, leaving in its wake a stiff, uncomfortable clarity that left Benedict uneasy. His father sat heavily in the tall leather upholstered chair behind his desk and gestured for Benedict to pull up another chair.

The two men drank their wine in an eerie silence for a long minute before the Duke, setting his empty glass on the desk, asked in a hoarse but steady voice, “So, Benedict…you say you have more to tell me of what’s gone on with you.”

Benedict drew in a long, heavy breath, then nodded. *Where to start?* he wondered.

“Do you know a small town called Gower’s Grove?” Benedict asked carefully.

“I can’t say I do.”

“You should, Father. It’s only a few hours’ ride from here, and more

importantly, it's on Preston land."

Dark clouds passed before the Duke's eyes. He reached for the open bottle of wine, and for a moment, Benedict feared he had lost his father once more. But after refilling his glass and taking a long drink, the Duke nodded for Benedict to continue.

Benedict felt he was speaking his sentences all out of order, dipping from affectionate descriptions of the townspeople's ingenuity to defences of the Devons gang's actions to indignant remonstrations of how the Duke and his forebears had failed their people.

He spoke for what felt like hours of how their line of dukes had let down the people of Gower's Grove just as Benedict had failed their family with his own behaviour and how this quiet community of artisans had turned to banditry purely for survival. Through it all, the older man said not a word but merely listened and watched his son carry on with his story.

"That is…a great deal to consider, Benedict," the Duke said, at last, his wrinkled fingers rubbing his eyes in consternation. *He looks even older still than when I first walked in here,* Benedict thought, feeling guilt gnaw at his insides as he watched his father wrestle with what he had just been told.

"There's more," Benedict added. "Something else happened. Something important."

The Duke looked up, alarm in his eyes that, despite all the draughts of wine he had finished, looked to see more clearly than Benedict could ever remember.

“I…fell in love. With a woman who is among my gang of captors.” Benedict blushed, feeling he was sounding ridiculous, though even as he felt himself wilt at his father’s scalding gaze, he knew he must continue. “She is a good woman, Father. Better than any I have ever known.”

The Duke blinked in confusion. “But she is a criminal, you say?”

Benedict nodded. “And I condemned her for that…at least, at first.” He felt a dreamy smile spread across his lips at the memory of their first heated conversations. It felt as though all that had taken place years ago. “Yet over my time with her, I learned that all she does is to help her village, to the point of endangering herself…and of putting off her own happiness for the security of others. She is absolutely wonderful, Father. Lovely, intelligent, kind…I had never known there were such people on this Earth, and now that I do, I feel I wish for nothing more than the chance to be with her.”

No scornful laughter or rebuke came from the Duke, as Benedict expected. Instead, the older man leaned back in his chair, fingers steepled in front of him, and he looked up into the cobwebs of the study thoughtfully. From the intense, focused look on his craggy face, it appeared the Duke was trying to remember something he had once known but was now long forgotten.

“You sound most certain of your feelings for her,” said the Duke at last in a cracked, aged voice.

“I am.”

His father looked over and studied him carefully. “You have never been given to flights of fancy, Benedict. Whatever your flaws, I have never known you to act a silly romantic or to give your heart away to just any maid who is willing. She loves you as well?”

“I…I believe so. I hope she does, at least.” A rush of sadness washed over Benedict at the memory of their tearful conversation the night before. “Yes, she does.”

Something inscrutable seemed to settle over the Duke as he looked away into the air between them. Then the Duke’s face pinched in an expression of pain. He leaned forward and rested a bony hand on Benedict’s knee. “Women…” The Duke sniffed suddenly as though beating back tears. “The love of a woman is a wonderful thing, Benedict. But it is not something you can rely upon. Love can be fickle, and even if your love is true and pure, a woman may give hers away to another.”

Is that really how it happened with Mother? For years Benedict had allowed himself to soften toward his poor deceased mother and place the blame for her affair at his cruel father’s feet. But seeing the hurt in his eyes, he imagined for the first time just how much more than his reputation the old Duke had lost.

“If you could go back and marry another instead of Mother…” His voice caught in his throat as though his chest were full of thorns. “Would you do it? Would you give up the happiness you had with her if it meant avoiding all the pain?”

Whatever had passed before the Duke’s eyes grew mottled, ambivalent. Before Benedict’s eyes, it looked as though his father was fighting some great battle within himself, and from the pained expression that crossed and re-crossed the old nobleman’s face, it looked to be a bloody one.

After an eternity that passed within a scant minute or two, the Duke licked his dry, cracked lips and cleared his throat to speak. “Love…” spoke the Duke in a hoarse voice. He sniffed, wincing as though in terrible agony, but continued after a time. “*True* love, Benedict…true love is a rare and fickle thing. But all the same, it is the only thing in this blasted life I have ever found to be worth anything.”

A faint feeling settled upon Benedict, as though he might pass out on the floor or else drift off into the atmosphere. *I had no idea Father was such a romantic at heart,* he thought, swallowing. *I had some sense that he and Mother were happy once, but that was long ago, when I was but a boy.*

The Duke rose from his seat, crossed the carpet to the window and threw open the curtain fearlessly, casting dazzling yellow light on the interior of the study for the first time in ages. He looked small and thin, silhouetted by the afternoon sunshine, but he was standing straight as an arrow as he gazed out at something or nothing with an air of profound contemplation.

“I believe I have some thinking to do,” said the Duke without turning away from the window. “Both of us do, from the sound of it. I think it best you leave.”

Crestfallen, Benedict rose to his feet with a scowl. *I was so sure something significant had happened that I had managed to pierce the icy tomb in which he has hidden for the last few years…*Now the consequences of failure marched through Benedict’s mind, and he felt a black pit open beneath his feet. All the same, he found he could do nothing more than retreat in the face of this reversal. “Yes, Father,” Benedict said blackly.

“I hope you’ll be good enough to come back tomorrow. Bring this… man from the gang with you as well.”

Benedict stopped in place, then wheeled around to look askance at his father. The Duke continued to stare at whatever captured his gaze out on the grounds or deep in his memory.

“Then…you will consider doing something to help Gower’s Grove?”

“I promise nothing, but perhaps the two of us can begin to make amends for what’s been done in our names whilst we’ve wallowed in our own misery. Even if it’s too late for some who have counted on us, we may be able to right this ship.” The Duke turned a weary eye back toward Benedict. “Let us…take one step at a time, you and I. Agreed?”

“Agreed.”

Turning to repeat his grand exit from this study, yet under vastly different circumstances, Benedict fancied he felt a smile creeping back onto his lips for the first time since leaving for London. *As long as each step brings me that much closer to reuniting with Marie,* he thought, shutting the door behind him, *I will make any agreement, hold to any pledge asked of me. I only pray Marie will be ready for me soon.*

Chapter 15

A Rare and Fickle Thing

The carriage ground to a halt outside the sprawling manor house, pausing to wait its turn in the long line of opulent vehicles stopping on the frosty road to let out their beautifully dressed occupants. The soft groan of the well-maintained axles was echoed by the louder, more exaggerated groan Benedict allowed himself in this last blessed moment of privacy.

“Oh, come off it, Benedict. To listen to you, we’ve just arrived at your public hanging.”

Benedict rolled his eyes, wallowing just a bit longer in this fit of moodiness. He knew he would correct his behaviour once the carriage door was opened. “Better to let out these evil spirits in our carriage rather than in public, I think. And at least a hanging would be a bit of excitement instead of this deadly dull business of Dunchester’s.”

“And here I was under the impression you’ve had your fill of excitement from running around the countryside with a band of thieves?” chuckled the Duke. “I suppose if you change your mind, we can always arrange to have you kidnapped once more.”

They shared a laugh, and for the hundredth time in the last few weeks, Benedict marvelled at the change in his father. When the Duke had proposed the night before that they attend this ball of Lord Dunchester’s together, Benedict had nearly fainted with surprise.

He really is almost like he used to be, Benedict thought, wondering at the realisation of how similar he and his father really were in bearing and humour. The old Duke looked elegant if uncomfortable in his finery—when Benedict had asked as they climbed into the carriage, the Duke was unable to recall the last time he had worn it, then made an uncharacteristic joke about being only half-sure there was a George on the throne the last time he had donned this coat.

"We'd have to find a new gang to carry out that particular task," Benedict said as he adjusted his silk cravat. "From what Mister Devons says, his men are being run ragged on all the assignments we've been finding for them."

The Duke grunted with approval. "They truly have been performing marvels, if you tell me true. I would hate to think Mister Devons and the rest of the erstwhile gang are suffering from overwork, though."

"Knowing Mister Devons, he's more apt to be playing at some other scheme. Or at least angling for a chance to loaf around instead of working."

The Duke reached out and patted Benedict's knee affectionately as they once again shared in warm laughter, their carriage jerking as they moved closer to the door of the great Dunchester house. His father stifled a shiver at the cold winter wind that poured in through the open window, and Benedict pulled down the shade instinctively.

It is absolutely a marvel, though, the way things have changed over these past months, Benedict ruminated. After some long, decisive talks between the Duke of Preston and Mark Devons, an accord had finally been reached.

The gang would not be dissolved, but instead, they were hired by Benedict's father and put to work righting the suffering that had been allowed to continue under the Duke's indolent rule. As Benedict had hoped, the Duke had thrown himself wholeheartedly into correcting these ills, and poured the family fortune into feeding and housing his people.

Naturally, this project had involved a great deal of coordination, almost all of which had fallen to Benedict. Day after day he found himself writing to the heads of local communities, purchasing goods from London merchants, or escorting Will, Jeb, and other gang members on missions of delivery or repair.

The oncoming winter had been a dark spot on the horizon, as Mark had warned the Duke time after time that the people were like to freeze or starve to death this year if not adequately provisioned. However, now that winter had come upon them, it appeared that they had been successful in their mission. For the first time in years, the future was looking bright for the men, women, and children of Gower's Grove and all the villages on Preston land.

It was good, happy work, and even as Benedict found himself collapsing into bed exhausted at the end of each day, he was stricken by how much better it felt to spend his days helping others than to lose himself in drunkenness and gambling night after night.

Indeed, he found it immensely gratifying to see the smiles on the faces of old Missus Potley and that terrible chatterbox Mister Keller whenever he and the gang were successful in delivering the needed goods or services from the city.

But through it all, a terrible black dread had hung over everything—still Benedict had not seen hide nor hair of Marie. Mark and Will were

evasive every time Benedict asked after her, and he had only heard the odd rumour or half-whispered comment about her from the rest of the gang. Between working with the gang at their benevolent labours and being made to go to a different ball every night by his father, he had scarcely had a moment to himself to go out and find Marie on his own.

When Benedict did find her, he knew he would waste not a second wondering how to resume their affair. He had carried through with this approach a thousand times in his daydreams every day that passed. In one fluid movement, he would take her in his arms and hold tight onto her, never to let her go. *'I was a fool for letting you slip away,'* he would tell her. *'If you will forgive my foolishness, know that I will never again make such a terrible error.'* She would accept his proposal with tears in her eyes, and what followed would be a kiss that would surpass the heavens above in its sheer, breathtaking beauty.

I will find you, Marie, Benedict breathed, feeling the truth of this oath echo deep within his heart. *Whatever it takes, I will find my way back to you and win your heart again. Our love was won through difficulty once, and it is worth fighting for a thousand times more.*

"I shudder to think what has become of the fashion of the *ton* in the time since I removed myself from polite society," chuckled the Duke as he slowly stepped out of the open door of the carriage, supporting his weight on a silver-tipped cane.

Benedict started, surprised to be pulled back into the waking world from his reverie. Pulling his warm winter cloak around his shoulders, he followed his father onto the snow-covered path flanked by burning braziers that led into the house of Dunchester.

A weary smile of nostalgia crossed Benedict's face. *Strange to think that*

this was where it all started to go wrong, he thought, swallowing. *But these are not the same times, and I am not the churlish boy I was then. I am resolved not only to repair my family's reputation but to help those who are counting on us for their very survival.* He set his chin in determination, realising what a powerful thing it was to carry a worthy cause into danger with him.

Benedict quickly lost himself in thought, contemplating how to approach any of his peers who had offensive or salacious things to say about him and how he could best win them over. He repeated to himself the philosophy that had seen him through a hundred balls and dinner parties since returning to London: *Every conversation I have is another rung on Gower's Grove's ascent, another brick in my rebuilt reputation, another step back to Marie.*

So consumed was Benedict in his plans that he nearly walked right into his father, who had stopped on the path and was gazing out onto the white-tipped gardens of Dunchester. Benedict looked at the Duke inquisitively, not recognising the look of awe on the old man's face as he stared at the snow falling from the sky.

"Remarkable. I'd never imagined a place like this could look so beautiful." The Duke's eyes followed the constellation of flakes that drifted slowly to the ground in the yellow glow of the torches. Despite the chill in the air, his father held himself proudly upright, resting his weight on his cane, as he looked with wonder on the scenery before them. *It really is quite beautiful after all, isn't it?*

"You go on ahead, Benedict," said the Duke thoughtfully. "Give an old man a bit of time to breathe before being confronted with a thousand questions by a thousand old friends and rivals."

The look of trepidation on his father's face was immediately familiar to Benedict—he had felt this same hesitation himself four years earlier

and still sensed echoes of it within himself now. He nodded, patting his father on the shoulder. “Just don’t catch your death of cold out here, with all your breathing.”

The Duke’s eyes glittered in the dim evening light, a wry smile on his wrinkled face. “And leave my title to a lovesick infant like you? It’ll take more than the claws of winter to pull me into my grave, Benedict. There’s a bit more living I’ve a mind to indulge in before that day.” Father and son shared a smile, then Benedict turned to continue on his way into the ball.

“I’ll keep an eye on him, my lord, don’t you worry,” called Lionel from the seat of their carriage.

“Good man. Thank you, Lionel!” Benedict answered, then proceeded into the entryway of the Dunchester house He took a final breath of the bitter winter air to clear his head and strode steadily into the place where he had once allowed his life as he had known it to come to an end.

“The Most Honourable Marquess of Elebury!” called a footman who stood beside the ingress of the vast ballroom. As these words echoed out over the crowded floor of dancers and revellers, Benedict sensed a dozen eyes dart in his direction. Then a score, a hundred. Every wealthy man and lady in the room simultaneously tried at once to take a look at the once disgraced son of the Duke of Preston without it being known that they were doing so.

A flash of fear penetrated Benedict to his core. He was filled with the urge to flee, to run back to the squalor that had once harboured him from their spiteful gazes. But a vision of Marie blossomed in his mind, and he was filled once more with a purpose that armoured him from any evil his peers could muster. *Good,* he thought, pulling himself up to his full height. *Let them look. After all, I’m here to be seen.*

An hour passed quickly for Benedict, then another. It was shocking how easily he had slipped back into the old game of civil conversation and matching wits with the other pillars of London nobility.

One conversation after another was turned cannily from judgmental speculation on the fortunes of the Prestons, to eager agreements to contribute resources or information to Benedict's scheme to better the fortunes of their countrymen. Each time he walked away from another meeting he heard murmurs of amazement at his improved behaviour or recent glowing standing in the *ton*.

Sipping slowly from a single glass of wine, Benedict charmed one former rival after another, watching them repeat the latest scandals to one another without permitting the vicious words into his ear. After a time, he felt himself beginning to grow bored with this sport, returning to daydreams of happier times even as he charmed smiles out of dour old codgers and brittle gentlewomen.

If only I could have stayed the captive of Marie and her father's gang for a hundred days instead of but a week, Benedict thought, ruefully finishing his glass of wine as he half-heartedly swept his eyes across the ballroom in search of a new contact or acquaintance with whom to speak. *Or if only Marie and I could have stayed in that old abandoned house for the rest of our days, never coming out or facing the trivialities of the rest of the world…*

So consumed was Benedict by these imaginings—though he had indulged in this particular fantasy thousands of times in the previous months—that he very nearly missed the excited words that wafted on the warm winter air, spoken in a frantic tone amid a gaggle of well-dressed women who were passing him by.

“—right over here!”

“Who is, Lady Emilia?”

“The shopkeeper I told you about! Come on, I have to introduce you to her!”

The other woman scoffed, a look of disgust marring her aristocratic features. “A shopkeeper? Whatever would a woman like that be doing at a society event such as this?”

It can’t be.

Standing on his tiptoes to peer over the crowd that now separated them, Benedict could just make out the look of excitement on the face of Lady Emilia Crane. He walked closer to them without realising what he was doing, an overwhelming germ of a possibility taking root in his heart and pulling him after the women with the force of a tempest.

The young woman gave an exasperated sigh, then explained to her companions with an impatient tap of her foot, “I tell you, the needlework this shop will sell is no ordinary stuff. It truly is the finest I have ever seen, and simply everyone I know is saying the same thing.”

“If it’s so exquisite, why are you not wearing any tonight, hmm?”

“*Will* sell? What do you mean?” asked a third lady.

“The shop is not yet open, but it’s already the talk of the *ton*!” enthused Lady Crane. “That must be why the shopkeeper is here—greedy old Dunchester or his wife must have invited her here to try to get in and buy the best of her stock before anyone else gets a chance. Come on!”

“What fun!”

“Here, Lady Crane,” Benedict called out, barely realising he had dropped his glass on the floor in his rush to catch the lady in purple before she could rush away. Lady Crane looked to him with shocked recognition, but he spoke hurriedly without acknowledging this reaction. “Please, you must tell me…who is this shopkeeper you speak of?”

“I do beg your pardon!”

“Aren’t you Lord Elebury?”

Ignoring these outcries by her companions entirely, Benedict had to restrain himself from shaking Lady Crane by the shoulders. Each second that passed could mean the difference between finally making his way back to his love and her flying from his grasp once again.

“Your shopkeeper with the needlework,” Benedict repeated, his voice growing louder and more desperate. “Who is she? What’s her name? Where does she come from?”

When the young lady who had, a lifetime ago, been a subject of much attraction for Benedict, opened her mouth to stammer out an answer, he did not hear her. Benedict had already sighted the shopkeeper in question on the far side of the room, and he could hear nothing at all above the pounding of his heart in his ears.

Looking as though she had just stepped from a Classical pedestal in a museum, the beautiful young woman was dressed in a dazzling translucent gown of shining white. Her black curls, so given to cascading about her face in Benedict's mind's eye, were pinned cleverly atop her head in a thoroughly modern style that he had never appreciated before this moment but now thought was the most beautiful coiffure he had ever seen. And just as his eyes fell upon her and he felt the world around him shrink away into nothing, her pearlescent grey eyes met him at the same moment. Even through the crowd that separated them, he saw her breath catch in her chest just as his had in his own.

It's her. It's Marie.

Benedict could not say whether he ran to Marie's side and she to his, or if he adhered to the expectations of society and walked at a more gentlemanly pace across the ballroom floor. He could not say if he bid farewell or thank you to Lady Crane, if he saw anyone else from his past along the way. All he knew was that he and Marie were together —close together, all of a sudden, close enough that he could feel her heart pounding in his own chest.

"Miss Devons," he said, bowing deeply as though greeting the highest noblewoman in the land. He took her creamy white hand in his and reached it up to his lips to leave a sensuous kiss on her skin, enjoying the tiny tremble he felt shake her frame at the contact.

“Lord Elebury,” Marie answered once he released her hand. She curtsied with a deftness that Benedict felt pull at his heart. *My Lord, I missed seeing her so much I can only now feel how much it hurt!*

Eyes turned to the pair from the crowd that surrounded them—the most aggrieved of them belonging to the fat old Duke of Dunchester, to whom Marie had just been speaking—but to Benedict, they might as well have been alone in the vast ballroom.

He cast about in his mind for the words he had practised every night in his dreams, yet found his brain wholly empty. Benedict suddenly felt very aware of how silly he must look, and as he laughed awkwardly, he heard Marie perform the very same action.

“I’m not surprised to see you here,” Benedict said, fairly yelling over the thunder that beat in his chest. When Marie raised an inquisitive eyebrow, he explained, “I always knew you would be a rousing success in whatever you did. And from the reception you seem to be getting in your debut in the *ton*, I can see I was right.”

“Oh?” Marie asked, a rosy tint coming to her pale cheeks. “And just how were you so very sure I would succeed? Because your advice for winning over London society was just so very good?”

“No. Because I haven’t the slightest flicker of a doubt that you will succeed in anything you set your mind to.”

“Well, if it isn’t Lord Elebury,” grumbled the Duke of Dunchester with an evil chuckle in his throat. “I thought I’d heard something about you coming by to ingratiate yourself to your betters once again. I believe it

was Lord Dunlop who was just telling me he heard you'd turned bandit whilst you were wrapped up in that unfortunate kidnapping business, ha ha!"

Benedict felt a twinge of anxiety echo through his heart at the sound of these words, but they were immediately muffled by the beauty before his eyes. And when Marie smiled up at him, her eyes glittering in the light of the thousand candles that burned above their heads, the wicked man's voice, face, very being were drowned out entirely from his world.

Marie licked her lips subtly, then asked in a dulcet tone, "What if I tell you that you are still a shameless flatterer who will tell a young woman any foolish thing that enters your noble head, my lord?"

"I would answer that I've every reason to go on with my shameless flattery," Benedict replied without hesitation. He took up Marie's hand and kissed it once more, his lips finding a familiar site of ecstatic contact amid her delicate white fingers. "After all, it earned me a kiss once, not long ago. Why would I ever stop, after encouragement like that?"

Marie's lips, red and plump as though she had just been biting them nervously, curled in a winning smile. "There is only one thing I lack for my rousing success in London, I'm afraid."

"And what is that?"

She stepped closer to Benedict and cocked her elbow invitingly. "A dance partner," she said softly, her voice still cutting cleanly through the indistinct murmurs that suffused the air around them. "For some reason, my mentorship in shopkeeping focused primarily on dancing,

you see, but without a suitable partner, I find it difficult to fit in any better in the *ton*."

"A most horrible omission. Allow me to rectify this absence, then," Benedict answered, placing his hand on her hip and pulling her close. Electricity coursed through them both as their skin made contact yet again. Benedict felt as though he had been missing some part of his own body for months, and now he was made gloriously, achingly whole once again. Together they glided across the polished floor, carrying one another far from any whispers or prying eyes into a world of music and light all of their own making.

The music swelled, a luscious string melody that carried the two dancers off their feet, up past the glittering chandeliers, into a cloudy white heaven made up of only their perfectly matched forms. Benedict and Marie moved in sync with one another as if they were already of one flesh, one mind that worked together with the coordination of a heart beating away its constant time through the body it has always known.

Benedict gazed into Marie's eyes and felt himself fight to draw breath. The beauty that looked back at him from those perfect grey depths contained all the wonders of God's Earth, held within them all the happiness Benedict had ever experienced and the untold bliss the future still possessed for the two of them. Tears flowed freely down his cheeks, so awestruck was he by Marie's unparalleled beauty.

"Now it is my turn, Miss Devons," said Benedict with a coy smile.

"Your turn?"

"To take you hostage."

Marie laughed with a delighted innocence that stirred up still deeper joy within him. “Forgive my ignorance, but is it still being taken hostage if I go with you willingly?”

His smile grew wider still. “My dear Marie,” he whispered. “Whether you are my hostage or I yours, the truth of the matter remains the same—neither of us need ever be alone again.”

Then he could withstand the anticipation no longer, and there, amidst the clouds of their ardour, Benedict brought his lips to Marie’s and delivered his wordless oath to her with a kiss. In a blissful, blinding instant, it was as though he could breathe again for the first time in years. Their lips roamed around one another’s familiar territories, singing choruses of dedication in the delight that played through their bodies.

I will never again make such a terrible error. I will never let you go again, so long as I live.

Her answer was wordless, passionate, and unmistakable.

Nor will I. I am yours, today and for all the days of my life.

Their vow, eternal and unreserved, was sealed with another kiss there amidst the clouds, carrying them away from any of the world’s ills into a rare and beautiful land containing wonders and beauties unknown on Earth or heaven.

Epilogue

Nearly Perfect

In the sputtering orange lamplight of the now empty store, Amelia looked exhausted. Yet all the same, into the young woman's eye came an impish twinkle that reminded Marie of herself just as Amelia asked, "Will I see you for breakfast tomorrow?"

"Of course! I wouldn't miss it," Marie answered without hesitation. Or she attempted to, but as she happened to be overwhelmed by a powerful yawn, all she could utter from behind her hand was an incomprehensible string of syllables. Amelia giggled, then was herself interrupted in a similar fashion just as she was asking Marie to repeat herself.

"I said I wouldn't miss it," laughed Marie, putting a hand affectionately on her sister's shoulder. Through the window, she could see the London street, no longer busy now that it was well after dark and all the Devons sisters' clients had long since retired happily with their purchases.

"An odd thing, that, when spoken by a woman who has missed our last three breakfasts."

"I haven't…." But Marie closed her mouth, realising she could not honestly finish this protest. *Have I really been absent so often?* she wondered, feeling her cheeks flush with embarrassment. *I hadn't meant to, certainly. It's only that it's so damnably easy to lose track of time in the morning…especially when Benedict is not off on business for his father.*

Evidently seeing a guilty expression cross Marie's features, Amelia playfully grabbed her sister by the shoulders, smiling merrily. "Come now, none of that!" she laughed. "You've had more than enough of putting aside your own happiness for the good of others…More than a lifetime's worth, if you ask me. Which nobody ever does."

Marie matched her sister's smile with a slightly wan grin of her own. "I'll be there tomorrow, Amelia, really I will."

"No, you won't. You'll be abed with your man, just as I would if I were in your position." Amelia shook her head in pleasant disbelief. "It's fine, Marie. Enjoy yourself for once in your life. I can manage breakfast on my own without starving or perishing from loneliness, I promise you."

Feeling herself blush horribly at the implication, Marie's hands flew to her mouth as if to seal away any unwitting confirmations or dishonest denials. As Amelia turned back to the door with a knowing laugh, settling a light summer mantle on her shoulders, Marie managed to squeak, "From what I've heard, you and Will Carpenter have missed a fair few meals yourselves of late. Some say you two are no longer fighting like cats and dogs, even though I struggle to believe it."

"Since when do you believe everything you hear?" Amelia asked lightly over her shoulder as she stepped out into the night. "Goodnight, Marie. I shall see you here in time to open the shop, as always."

"Goodnight, Amelia," Marie called after her. She stood to watch Amelia walk out of sight before closing the door and turning the key. Even if the old gang house that Amelia had made her home was only a

few short blocks away, barely out of sight around the corner, Marie still liked to keep an eye on her younger sister. London's streets were not nearly as safe as the dirt roads of Gower's Grove, and grew more perilous after dark.

"Then again," she muttered under her breath with a sardonic smile, "perhaps I should worry more for whoever is unwise enough to accost Amelia." Indeed, her sprightly young sister's attitude had frightened off many a street-tough since arriving in the city, and now that her reputation as Mark Devons' daughter and Marie's sister was widely known, London's criminal element tended to give her a wide berth both day and night.

Turning away from the door, Marie sighed as she pulled out the simple yet elegant pin that had suspended her long black curls in place atop her head. She shook out her hair, revelling for a moment in the exuberant sense of freedom that came with the sensation, then methodically, on tired feet, snuffed out each of the dozen lamps in the empty store one by one.

Despite her fatigue from a long day spent in toil, each item on display was welcome to her eyes, and she was greeted with tiny sips of delight by each lovingly handmade item she happened upon. Handmade walking sticks carved of beautiful dark wood, cunningly woven scarves and rugs from the order of Sisters who made their home on the rocks by the sea…and, of course, more exquisite needlework from Missus Rowles and her daughters.

None of Robert's cabinets, though, she observed with a proud smile. She and Amelia had sold their entire supply of those within three days of opening. *The whole Potley family will be so pleased. This will buy everything for their new baby as well as a new winter coat for old Missus Potley. And, more importantly, it will help see the village through the season without a doubt.*

It really has been nearly perfect, hasn't it? Marie sighed in contentment, sitting behind the counter and withdrawing the small moneybox that contained the day's earnings. By the light of a single lamp, she dutifully checked their income against her carefully maintained book of accounts.

It really has been nearly perfect, hasn't it? I keep expecting to wake to find that I have dreamed this wonderful existence or to be accosted by one of the gang and told that I have merely been playing a part all this time.

This last thought sent a prickle of fear down the hairs on the back of her neck, a sensation that was only heightened as she opened the door to her rooms at the back of the shop and sensed a presence in the darkness of the back corner.

There is someone here, Marie thought, her hand unconsciously reaching to her belt for her trusted knife and finding it empty save for her bulging purse. No sooner had she done this than a hood was removed from her little bedside lamp, casting a gentle orange light across the room and revealing the half-shadowed face of Benedict Carlton.

"Good evening, Miss Devons," said Benedict brightly from his casual cross-legged position in her simple wooden chair by the writing desk. "I've heard about the wondrous things you sell here, and I thought I would wait until you were no longer busy before I trouble you about making a purchase."

"How long have you been here?" Marie asked, her fist finding a familiar position of mock indignation at her hip.

"Not long, I don't think." Benedict made a show of pulling out his

pocket watch and checking the time. It was not the dazzling watch of a lord, but a humble thing that rarely told the time accurately, yet he had insisted on carrying it around despite Marie's protestations. Looking at the watch face, he gasped in mock surprise and put a hand to his cheek as if in shock. "My word, I suppose it's been more than two hours! The time fairly seems to fly by when it's spent appreciating true talent, I've found."

It was a struggle to maintain even a show of indignation at this man. All Marie wanted to do was to throw herself into his arms and kiss him until the breath left their bodies, though she had last seen him barely twelve hours before. But she maintained her well-practised façade of being put-upon by his antics, shaking her head ruefully as she emptied her purse into the little safe in her bureau. "It must be a fine thing to be a lord, with hours at your disposal to fritter away in idleness."

"Fritter, my eye!" Benedict protested, putting his foot on the ground and opening his mouth as if offended. "I have been hard at work appreciating the talent of a particular shopkeeper I've had my eye on."

"I thought you told me you were to be hard at work delivering a load of goods to Gower's Grove?"

He shrugged, and Marie could not help herself from appreciating the shape of his powerful arm muscles through his coat as he performed this gesture. "Jeb and I were seeing to the carts being loaded with the farming implements needed by some little town or other, but then we received word that the farmers had no need of this delivery, that they have already purchased the needed goods." Benedict grinned, an obvious look of pride on his face. "Apparently, they recently came into a good deal of money thanks to the sale of their goods by some lovely merchant in London."

Marie smiled, pleased with herself, and folded her arms as she fought to continue glaring at Benedict. “So, with nothing better to spend your time on, you have just been skulking around the shop all evening watching your beloved shopkeeper?”

“Surely that should be enough,” he quipped, folding his hands behind his head and putting his feet up on the nearby desk. “It may not be a difficult job, but someone certainly needs to do it. Work like yours is long overdue for a healthy amount of appreciation.”

Benedict smirked. *God, that damnable smirk of his,* Marie thought, feeling her cheeks redden at the sight as well as at the kindness of his words. *As if the man weren’t already too charming for his own good.*

“Are you certain you don’t want to ask your father to put a man on the task? I imagine he would find no shortage of volunteers.” Marie swept his feet off the desk with a casual push, smiling at him playfully as she did so.

“Oho, that quick to get rid of me, are you?” asked Benedict, a look of mock outrage on his face. He sneaked out a hand and grabbed onto her arm before she could flinch away. “As if you’d give up your captive that readily, after all you went through to hang onto me. I seem to recall some persuasion with a frying pan.”

“That was Amelia, you beast! Confusing me with my own sister—what a boor!” Marie tittered, struggling to pull herself away from Benedict. But he held onto her fast, pulling her close to his position in the office chair and lashing out with his other hand to either tickle her or draw her onto his lap. Whichever it was, Marie did not fight too hard.

“Was it? It must be that I’ve had one too many blows to the head. I

was kidnapped by a savage gang of ruffians, you know."

"Really? How frightening!" Marie gave a yelp as she was pulled fully off of her feet and onto Benedict's lap. Her feet were perched precariously upon the arm of the chair, but his strong arms held her firm in his grasp, and she blissfully wrapped her arms around his neck and allowed herself to tumble into those piercing blue eyes that gazed at her with such adoration.

"Oh yes, it was most terrifying," Benedict murmured, his mocking tone giving way in the face of the passion that wrapped around the two of them like a shroud. "For many days and nights, I lived in such fear that I could neither eat nor sleep. They were led by the most ferocious harridan one could ever imagine, with eyes like steel and a propensity for swinging around a razor-sharp knife that could cut a man's—"

Marie silenced him mid-sentence by pulling his head closer to hers, their lips meeting in a lustful open-mouthed kiss. She felt her insides quiver deliciously as his teeth brushed her lower lip. Her fingers played in the forest of his short golden hair, seeking purchase to bring him closer to her still.

After only a few moments, however, just as she felt the arousal building to a fever pitch in Benedict's heated breath, a stirring rising beneath her that stoked her own fire to an infernal heat…Marie pulled back from their kiss, smiling at the momentary look of disappointment on her lover's face.

"I will say that from what I have heard, this gang you speak of is no longer quite so bloodthirsty," she said as she tapped a finger against his flushed lips playfully. "Why, I hear these days they are as industrious and benevolent as any order of monastic brothers in the land. I have even heard talk of some of your so-called savage ruffians

settling into lives of quiet domesticity."

Benedict exhaled sharply, shifting his weight enjoyably beneath Marie. "You hear a great deal for a woman who claims to be working her fingers to the bone. It's a poor shopkeeper who spends all her time listening to her customers' gossip…."

"Thank you for yet another lesson on a subject about which you have no personal experience, my lord."

"But I confess, whoever your mystery informants are, they tell you true." He sighed and ran his hand up and down Marie's back gently. "Throughout my father's territory, things appear to be going swimmingly. Not without any dangers or setbacks, of course—I understand the fishermen up along the coast lost three boats in a storm last week, and the flocks in Woolford have had some awful ovine sickness with all the rain we've had this spring."

"That's terrible!"

"Yes, but this year the people have had something they lacked previously. As soon as their hardships grew unbearable, all it took was a word in the right ear for someone to pass the word along to your father. The gang was dispatched immediately with the requisite supplies, and all the affected parties were able to recover quickly and without incident." Benedict shook his head in wonder. "It's remarkable what hardy men and women can accomplish if they are not deprived of the resources they need to survive."

Marie nodded gravely, trying not to give any sign that Benedict's soothing hand had reached the spot on her spine that turned her body to jelly—the one they had discovered together in their enthusiastic

night-time explorations not long before.

"And these latest supplies were all purchased with the income from our shop?" asked Marie, subtly pressing her backside a bit harder against Benedict's thighs.

"Not a sou from my father—at your insistence, might I add." Benedict flashed his amazed smile, seemingly as intent on pretending he had not noticed the motion of Marie's derriere as she was on ignoring his hand on her back. "My father still insists he would be happy to continue his—how did he put it?—reinvestment of tax monies into the betterment of the countryside. Much as your father would be happy to continue receiving it as he had for the last several months."

Marie shook her head and pursed her lips in what she hoped was a pretty fashion. "Now that the shop is open and successful, the village can feed and shelter itself. I would no sooner have our incomes come from charity than I would from theft, if it can be avoided."

"A true paragon of virtue!" chuckled Benedict, and as he did so, he bounced his knees up and down, jostling Marie to and fro whilst keeping her firmly held in place on his lap. The two laughed loud and long as she clung to him tighter than ever, then kissed sweetly upon the lips. Marie cooed with pleasure, her eyes closing contentedly as he continued in a soft voice, "Who would have expected such behaviour from a ferocious harridan and leader of a gang of thieves?"

"I can scarcely believe it myself. It really has all come together perfectly," she sighed, a dreamy smile on her lips.

Marie felt Benedict's posture stiffen beneath her, and she looked to him with alarm. There was an odd, uncomfortable look on his face

that sent a chill down her spine. “Not quite,” he said in a sombre voice. “There is still one thing that is missing. Something very important.”

“What is it?”

Benedict nodded towards the desk. Nestled amid its papers and writing implements, Marie saw a small, shining lacquer box she had not noticed before. “What is that?” she repeated herself, but he would not answer but for a bashful twitch of his mouth and another nod in the box’s direction.

Puzzled, Marie reluctantly tore herself from Benedict’s arms and stood, feeling her dress cling to her feminine curves and feeling his eyes on said curves as she bent over the desk and retrieved the box.

It was a cunningly made container, she realised, without an obvious latch or hinge. “This is one of Robert’s works, isn’t it? I don’t believe I’ve seen it before, though…” Marie wondered aloud. It had been so gratifying that so many of the village’s artisans had returned home as of late.

She struggled to figure out how to open the box for a moment longer, but just as Benedict leaned forward and opened his mouth to give her some advice or jest at her difficulty, the top of the box slid to one side.

Marie gasped at what was contained within. She looked to Benedict with tears in her eyes, feeling her heart race in her chest as the implications sprinted through her mind.

“A little enough thing, I know,” said Benedict with, to Marie’s shock, a true look of embarrassed humility on his face. “But all we need for things to be perfect, I believe. If you will take it, that is.”

Already upon her finger, never again to depart it, was a Posey ring of brushed gold and a cunning arrangement of silvery-white pearls. Engraved upon the outside of the band in delicate letters were the words:

Such is the power of love in gentle mind,
That it can alter all the course of kind.

Uncharacteristic as it was for Benedict, the proposal was unspoken. And Marie met him in a manner just as out of character, though, she hoped, equally powerful.

Without a word, the box already dropping to the table, she ran to his arms and surrendered herself to his powerful grasp once more, their lips pledging to one another a silent covenant of love as their joyful tears mingled into a tincture as rare and powerful as it would be eternally constant.

THE END

Can't get enough of Marie and Benedict? Then make sure to check out the

Extended Epilogue to find out…

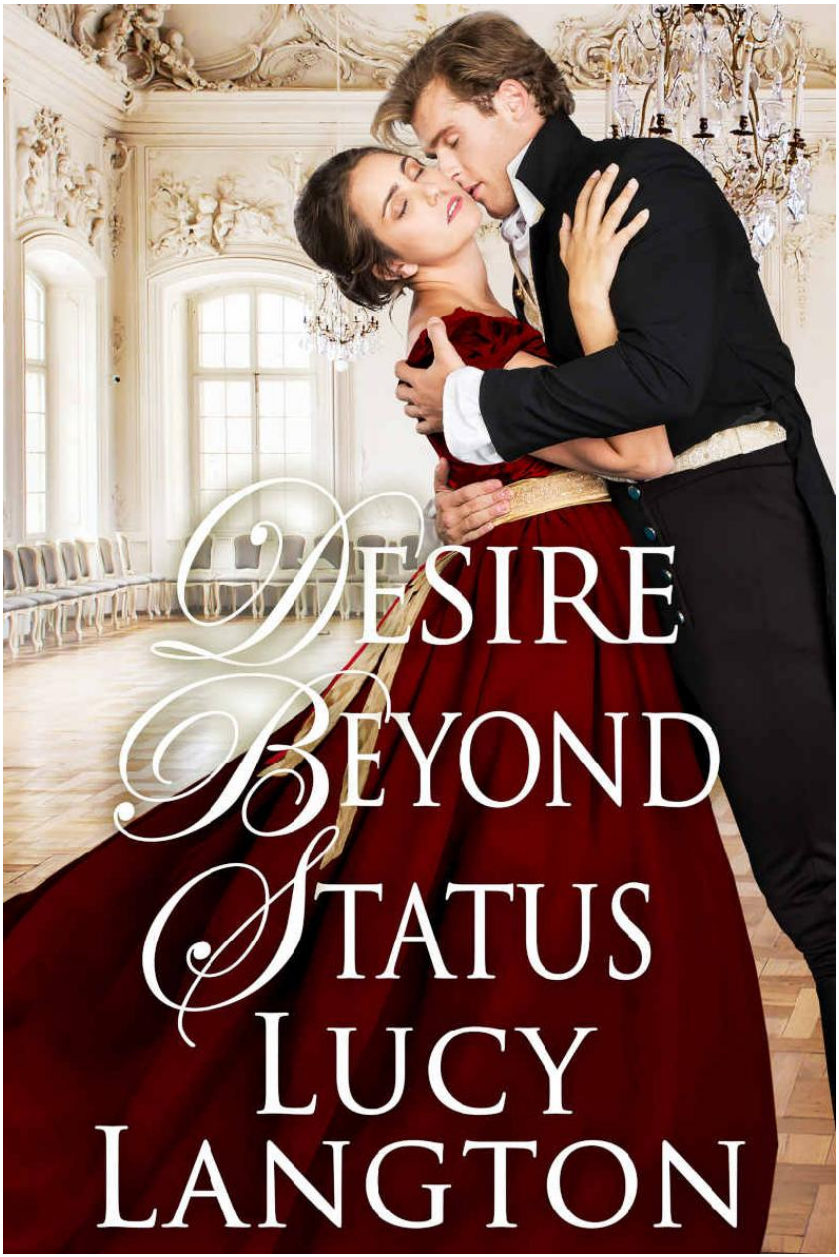
What kind of amazing news will Amelia and Will listen to?

What will the little playful sketch between Mark and the Duke to entertain their granddaughter be?

How will Benedict expose his love to Marie and how will she react to her husband's sinful touch?

Click the link or enter it into your browser
http://lucylangton.com/marie

*(After reading the Extended Epilogue, turn the page to read the first chapters from **"Desire Beyond Status"**, my Amazon Best-Selling novel!)*


DESIRE
BEYOND
STATUS
LUCY
LANGTON

Desire Beyond Status

Introduction

The fiery Eliza Baxter lives a peaceful life, until her aunt decides to take her to London for the Season in order to introduce her to the ton. Upon her arrival, the passionate Eliza finds herself in distress as she must endure her devious and jealous cousins, who will do anything to make her time in London unbearable. Yet, at the upcoming ball, Eliza's fateful encounter with the attractive Duke of Ellis will be her chance to gain a new ally, as they both have to get through the Season avoiding the pretentious nobles. However, Eliza's growing feelings for the Duke will soon set her heart on a fire she is unable to tame... Will she surrender to her burning desire for the enchanting Duke or will her lack of a title ruin what her heart is deeply longing for?

Hugh Conrad, the new Duke of Ellis, is a war hero and a man of duty, who struggles to accept and live up to his title after the tragic passing of his brother. When his wicked mother insists that he must find a wife, Hugh masters his past strategic skills to sneak out of his troubles. However, a ball will soon be the cause of meeting the most interesting and captivating woman he has ever seen. When Hugh lays eyes on the seductive Eliza, he will not only agree to a fraudulent courtship with her in order to mislead the suppressive relatives, but also to dive into an endless game of lust. Will Hugh overcome society's norms and fight for his flaming passion?

Even though Eliza and Hugh come together under the most unexpected circumstances, their plan soon turns into a lustful affair and when they cross the line, it is impossible to resist their tantalising romance. As their tremendous affection unfolds, so does the malice of a cunning woman who desperately schemes for their separation. With many forces conspiring against them, will Eliza and Hugh manage to pursue their unconventional attraction? In a society that revolves around titles and income, could that love and desire prevail after all?

Chapter 1

Frederica Newport. Countess of Carthope entered the Manchester townhome, being ushered into the sitting room, which was not to her taste at all. For Frederica, she considered that one's surroundings must always reflect their status in the world and their wealth. Her own home in London was upholstered in the finest fabrics and with the utmost lavishness in mind. In fact, many of the fabrics were provided to her by the man that owned the home she now stood in.

"Would you care for some tea as you wait for Mr Baxter?" a servant asked.

"That would be most agreeable," Frederica replied, toying with the pearls about her neck as she inspected the modest room.

Frederica knew that Mr Baxter was a man of wealth, and that's why the modest surroundings troubled her. He was considered the finest textile tradesman, and mothers with eligible daughters would come to his Manchester home frequently in order to deal with him directly. For Frederica, it was the first time she'd taken such a drastic step. Her expectations were not met in terms of Mr Baxter's interior design.

Seating herself upon a stiff sofa, Frederica straightened her blue silk dress and green sash. Her own gown was made from Mr Baxter's textiles, and alas, Frederica bemoaned the fact that she didn't know how to afford another.

"Tea, Lady Carthope," the servant said, returning with the tray.

“Set it over there,” Frederica commanded, as though it were her own home. Of course, the Baxters were impossibly beneath her since she was married to an earl. Still, of late, the earl’s gambling was making it so that, one day, she might not be able to look down upon anyone.

“My lady,” Mr Baxter said, entering wearing a neat brown coat. He was a man that was very affable in appearance, with dark brown hair and eyes. Frederica had to admit that he was handsome, and she could see why her sister once found an appeal. But now, her sister was dead, and Frederica could finally admit to herself that Mr Baxter was not only a merchant; he was a brother-in-law that she always denied.

“Mr Baxter, I’m pleased that you chose to meet with me on such short notice.”’

“I must admit that I was surprised.”

“And why should you be?”

Mr Baxter elevated his brow, challenging Frederica’s question. “Lady Carthope, you know that we have not spoken in some time.”

“And whose fault was that, I dare say?”

Yes, Frederica was positively at odds with her late sister. Only her death would change that, for Frederica felt some small measure of penitence now.

Mr Baxter remained composed and seated himself, folding his hands in his lap. “You and Margaret were at odds.”

“With all due respect, Mr Baxter, my sister could be… unkind. Alas, she had reservations about my marriage.” What Frederica didn’t wish to say was that her sister was jealous all the while

“She never expressed such reservations to me.”

“I’m sure that she didn’t! Margaret was a very stubborn and quiet person.”

“Lady Carthope, don’t you think that’s perhaps insensitive at this time?”

Frederica frowned. “What was insensitive was my sister… banishing me in my time of need?”

Mr Baxter fell silent before replying, “Perhaps I can serve you this cup of tea.”

“Most agreeable.”

Frederica inspected Mr Baxter as he poured the tea. How could he remain so composed when the situation between she and Margaret was so dire? Did Mr Baxter not know of how Frederica had been so horribly wronged? She was so incensed by Margaret’s conduct—the

memory of it alone making Frederica need her smelling salts—that she hadn't even bothered to express a desire to meet Margaret's daughter, who resided in that very home.

Mr Baxter handed Frederica the tea, and she was surprised that she took it with a shaky hand. Yes, all of this was playing upon her nerves so terribly. She was so utterly cross with the Earl of Carthope for the position that he'd put her in. Why was the whole world conspiring against her?

"Your furnishings are very plain," Frederica remarked, taking a sip of her tea.

"I prefer it that way. I find that simple surroundings help to calm the mind."

"I cannot agree in the slightest," Frederica protested. "I think that one's surroundings must create interest, amusement, and rapture. At least, that's how my own furnishings were designed."

Mr Baxter returned to his seat in silence, gazing out the window. "Lady Carthope, I can't help but ask what has brought you here today."

"I've come to make amends, can't you see?"

"It seems to me that you've come for a reckoning. Perhaps you should have done that when my wife was still alive."

Oh, none of it was going to plan. Frederica had expected Mr Baxter to be penitent, confirming her belief that she'd been wronged by Margaret. Obviously, such penitence was not written on his brow, and Frederica would have to pivot.

"Mr Baxter, I'm sure that you're aware of my situation." Frederica's voice was hushed.

Mr Baxter cleared his throat, becoming visibly uncomfortable. "I think that I know what you're referring to."

"Yes, news has spread to Manchester! Everyone in town already knows. I fear that the earl has lost all control, and now I'm at my wits' end."

"Lady Carthope, how is it that I may be of assistance, for I sense that my assistance is required," Mr Baxter replied wearily.

Frederica, now indignant, jutted her chin into the air and spoke through her teeth. "It's of the utmost importance now that my daughters marry, and this very season. Latica and Henrietta have laid dormant for too long. They're remarkably pretty and accomplished girls, and I'm sure that they can be a success."

"With the right apparel," Mr Baxter interjected. "I've heard this before. In fact, I deal with these situations on a daily basis."

Frederica brightened, displaying a smile. "Yes, I knew that I could count on you. The fabrics that you secure are of the utmost quality.

Everyone in London knows it."

"Our silk is from France," Mr Baxter said with no small measure of pride. "And we have new textiles from the Orient. I take great pains to only secure the best."

Frederica set down her teacup in excitement. "Yes, I know this to be true! Oh, I know that funds are not as they should be right now, but I want only the best for my girls. They will be the sparkling diamonds of the London season! I'm sure of it."

Mr Baxter remarked, "My lady, do you not think it troublesome that you put so much hope in your girls, in light of your present circumstances? I myself have a daughter, and I understand that that's… a bit trying."

Frederica was positively offended. How dare Mr Baxter tell her how to be a good mother. "Successful marriages will make Latica and Henrietta happy. They've expressed as much. Oh, Mr Baxter, I know that you're only a textile merchant, so it must be difficult to understand the hearts and minds of society girls."

Frederica thought that he might be offended by her statement, but instead, Mr Baxter remained unnervingly calm. "I suppose that we have different perspectives on the matter. My daughter has expressed a desire to come out into society this year, but it will be a far different situation than what your girls might encounter."

Frederica became intrigued. "She… wishes to come out?"

“Indeed. Eliza is keen upon marriage, but only if she finds the right person. I have expressed to her that there is no rush, despite the fact that she’s twenty years of age.”

Frederica was positively agog! Why Eliza Baxter was nearly a spinster at that age. She retorted under veiled lids, “I suppose at her age she can make such a decision, but I’m horrified that she hadn’t made it sooner.”

“I believe that the death of my wife stalled the matter. Her interest waned as she wore her mourning clothes.”

For a brief moment, Frederica felt compunction. She herself did not wear black after her sister’s death for reasons that were all too clear. Yet still, she felt for Eliza Baxter. Frederica couldn’t imagine the difficulty of losing a mother, even if it was someone as incorrigible as her sister.

“Well… if she ever needs some motherly advice, I’m sure that I can be of assistance. Particularly if I could enjoy some sort of *discount* on the items I’m purchasing.” To Frederica’s mind, this was not a low blow in the slightest. This was ingenuity and resourcefulness.

“I don’t think that that will be necessary, Lady Carthope. My daughter is perfectly capable of navigating these waters on her own.”

“I highly disagree.” Frederica pulled her shoulders back in pride. “A young girl needs guidance when it comes to these affairs. Surely, she has a governess to chaperone her.”

“Indeed.”

“Well, that is not enough! A girl needs her mother by her side when fielding the advances of men. I would have it no other way.”

Indeed, Frederica’s mother had been a saint when it came time for her to marry. She was hawk-eyed and perspicacious, making it apparent that no one but a man of the highest quality could marry Frederica. If only her mother could see her now in dire straits!

Frederica’s mother had turned a blind eye when Margaret married Mr Baxter. Of course, Margaret married beneath herself, and she had claimed that it was for love. What a horrible mistake her sister had made.

“I thank you again for your offer, my lady,” Mr Baxter went on. “But Eliza is not in need of your assistance. I think that we can keep her out of these affairs.”

It was all so offensive, but Frederica would endure for the sake of her own daughters. It occurred to Frederica that she had no idea what Eliza Baxter looked like. She never considered Margaret a great beauty, but Mr Baxter was handsome. She feared that Eliza might have male features because of that. Perhaps that was what also kept her from marrying till such a late age?

Getting down to business, Frederica began to explain the fabrics that she required. Mr Baxter excused himself and returned with items that fit her description, and all at once, Frederica was very pleased. The silks that he displayed shone like glassy water, and the colours were understated and mute in just the way that she preferred.

“I must say, Mr Baxter, you have a keen eye for textiles.”

“Textiles are my life. I am very skilled in my trade.”

“Oh, I would very much agree! This particular shade of green will suit Henrietta. She has my light colouring, so this hue shan’t be overpowering.”

Cocking her head to the side, Frederica considered how lucky it had been that she was the lighter sister. Where Margaret had dark hair and eyes, Frederica had sandy blonde hair and soft hazel eyes. It was merely fortune that graced her with these gifts.

“And the sum?” Frederica asked.

Mr Baxter pulled out a piece of paper and wrote upon it, handing her the note. Frederica froze when she beheld the sum.

“I did administer a bit of a discount,” Mr Baxter said in a businesslike fashion.

“But surely, this can’t be correct.”

“It is.”

Frederica gazed up at him in disgust. “I… I will find a way,” Frederica replied with determination. “I know that my husband has savings.”

“That is good to hear.” Mr Baxter returned to his chair with a pleasant smile upon his lips, which Frederica didn’t care for in the slightest.

Just then, the door to the sitting room opened, and a girl entered, wearing a simple white muslin gown. Frederica’s jaw dropped open as she inspected the girl. Yes, that was Eliza Baxter standing before her.

“Father, it’s time for my walk.”

“Very well, Eliza,” Mr Baxter replied. “But first, allow me to introduce you to your aunt. This is Lady Carthope.”

Both Frederica and Eliza gazed at one another. Oh, but it was dreadful! Eliza was far more beautiful than Frederica had expected.

“Lady Carthope has offered to be your chaperone for the season, Eliza,” Mr Baxter continued.

Eliza appeared shocked, then a smile rose upon her lips. “I… I would be grateful.”

Frederica’s eyebrows elevated. Now, she was beginning to regret making the offer.

Chapter 2

Latica Newport sat in the parlour of her family's London home, feeling no small measure of trepidation. Why was it so? Usually, Latica loved coming to London to see all the unique sights and enjoy in the splendour. This season, Latica knew that everything would have to change.

Her mother had said in no uncertain terms that Latica was to marry this season, as would her older sister, Henrietta. Why was this announcement so abrupt, and why did Latica wish that she could wait just one more year? Oh, she knew of her father's gambling and the dwindling Carthope funds. In fact, everyone knew about it. That was no doubt the reason why her mother was now insisting upon a hurried marriage. What's more, Frederica had her sights set on Hugh Conrad, the illustrious Duke of Ellis.

"Latica, where are you?" she heard her mother's voice call out.

"In the parlour, mother."

Very soon, Frederica arrived with Henrietta by her side. Frederica clasped her hands together. "I have such marvellous news!"

"What is it?" Latica asked, apprehensive for what her mother might say.

"I have just come from the dressmaker. Everything has been arranged."

“Is that where you’ve been all afternoon?” Latica had to ask, considering that her mother was always disappearing without announcement.

“Indeed. Oh, Latica, you’ll wear such finery this season.” Frederica stopped and placed her hands upon her hips. “Why do you not appear excited.”

Henrietta said, “Because she’d much rather read her silly books.” As Henrietta spoke, she inspected herself in the mirror. She was similar in colouring to Latica, but that was where the similarities ended. Henrietta was a far different specimen. “There are several gowns that I admire, and I dare say that I should be able to select the best ones first, seeing as I’m the eldest.”

“Oh, Henrietta, hush,” Frederica scolded, walking over and seating herself on a plush chair. “You shall both have marvellous gowns.” Frederica, seemingly winded, fanned herself with her hand.

Henrietta mused, “What do you suppose the Duke of Ellis’ favourite colour is? If I knew, I’d wear that colour all season long!”

“Don’t be so gauche, daughter. That would be all too obvious.”

Just then, several servants entered the parlour, carrying rather large white boxes. Frederica began to coo once more, and so did Henrietta, but Latica remained seated.

“Here we are!” Henrietta said, massaging her hands together as though staring at a tasty meal. “My heart is pounding with anticipation.”

“Latica, what are you doing seated there?” Frederica asked. “Come here at once.”

Latica begrudgingly got up from her seat to join her mother and sister. They were both flushed with excitement as the lids to the boxes were removed, and they peered down within. Henrietta was the first to reach down and apprehend a green gown, which she held up to her form.

“Oh, this is a triumph.”

“I like that one, as well,” Latica remarked, delighting in the soft green colour.

Henrietta immediately scoffed. “This is far more suitable for me. Consider how much lighter my skin is, Latica. It’s best that I wear this to the very first ball. I know that the Duke of Ellis will find it fetching.”

Frederica concurred. “Oh, you will turn his head for sure. I wouldn’t be surprised if he asks you to dance twice!”

“Nor would I,” Henrietta agreed.

Witnessing all of this, Latica felt invisible and wondered if it was all for the best. Her sister had been right; she wished to rather read her book in silence and not have to contend with the matter at hand. But sadly, this would be her life for the next several months, and she'd merely have to suffer through it.

"Where is father?" Latica asked.

Frederica became visibly uncomfortable. "Tending to business affairs, I suppose."

Latica felt her stomach flip. She knew what that insinuated, and it filled her with shame. Why had her father changed so over the years? And what's more, how could her mother possibly afford the rich apparel in those boxes.

"This is fitting," Henrietta said, taking out a puce gown and holding it up to Latica. "I think this is a good colour on you."

Latica crinkled her nose, not thinking the colour flattering in the slightest. "I'm unsure."

"Your sister speaks the truth," Frederica insisted. "Do try it on at once. It will look so lovely on your form."

Before Latica could do so, a steward entered the room and whispered something softly into Frederica's ear. She coloured once more and exhaled, turning to her daughters with a worried expression.

“Girls, there’s something that I must tell you.”

“The Duke of Ellis is coming for supper?” Henrietta asked.

Frederica frowned. “Don’t be silly, daughter. That would be unsuitable. We must wait for the duke to invite us to his home. Otherwise, it shall be a scandal.”

Henrietta sulked. “I have no patience in these matters.”

Frederica went on, “No, there’s someone very important that I wish for you to meet, and she has arrived just now. I have told you of… my dreadful sister?”

“Indeed,” Henrietta replied.

“Well, what I have not told you is that Margaret had a daughter. And… she’s the daughter to Mr Baxter, the textile salesman who sold me the remarkable fabric for these gowns. Now, there was a bit of a deal struck up and… Eliza Baxter shall be joining us for the season.”

Henrietta was agog, and even Latica’s jaw dropped open. How unlike her mother to make such an arrangement.

“Mother, how on earth did you think that that was a good idea?” Henrietta asked, sulking.

“Please understand, we must be kind in these matters. Once all was said and done, I was able to secure a minor discount which secured you these rich fabrics. Oh, I’m sure it won’t be all that dreadful! I have met the girl on one occasion, and she seems rather… kind.”

From Frederica’s tone, Latica could tell that there was something not being said. It was apparent that Henrietta was furious, but for a brief moment, Latica considered that she might be meeting a new friend.

The whole business surrounding her mother’s sister was something of a mystery. Latica had never had the chance to meet her, but her mother would tell horrid stories about what a pain she was. Considering the natural drama that her mother was prone to, Latica wondered if there was a great deal that went unsaid.

“For my part, I’m excited to meet her,” Latica offered, thinking it best to hold the situation in the proper light.

“Latica, what are you saying? Do you want someone else to vie for the Duke of Ellis’ attentions?” Henrietta asked. “Why, I’m told that his mother wants him married off quickly. We must be cunning in our pursuit of him.”

It was rather ghastly what Henrietta had just said. Latica almost wished that her sister would marry Hugh Conrad quickly so that the whole matter might be over and done with! That way, maybe Latica would have a bit of peace, and it could buy her some time before her own marriage. But considering her own mother’s haste, this was perhaps not to be the case.

“Girls, girls,” Frederica scolded. “I’ll have no more talk of this. She is a commoner, after all. There’s no chance that she will win the duke over… ” Again, Frederica faltered. “But let’s not talk of this any longer. I’ll have the servants bring tea so that we might sit down and meet Eliza in a proper fashion. I want each of you to be cordial.”

Henrietta protested, “But, mother, will she be sharing our gowns?”

“Heavens, no,” Frederica assured her. “Eliza is responsible for her own apparel. You needn’t worry yourself about that.”

“But where will she sleep?”

“In the guest room, you silly goose.”

Henrietta crossed her arms in front of her chest. “Well, I dare say, I hope that she shall be on the first floor instead of the third. I enjoy my peace and quiet in my chambers.”

Latica had the mind to roll her eyes. Her sister was rather a nuisance, and she already felt sorry for poor Eliza for what she would probably endure.

“Now then, let’s have these boxes removed.” Frederica clapped her hands together to order the servants to do so. “And let us be seated. Arrange yourselves in such a way that you look open and inviting, and you,” she said to a servant, “bring in the tea at once.”

The servant quickly fled from the room, and the girls sat on a sofa side by side. Henrietta straightened out her skirts and coiffed her hair, but Latica merely sat there blankly, wondering how on earth she was supposed to look pleasing and inviting as her mother instructed. The tea service was brought in, and each girl received a cup, then the butler entered.

“Would now be a suitable time, my lady?” he asked.

“Yes, do send her in.”

There was silence in the parlour as the three of them waited. Then, the door was opened once more, and the butler announced, “Miss Eliza Baxter.”

Latica, entirely in awe, turned to her sister, who coloured a dark crimson. Frederica sat nervously, fiddling with her hands before saying, “We’re so happy to have you in our home, Eliza. These are my daughters, Henrietta and Latica.”

Both girls sat dumb, seemingly unable to speak because Latica considered that Eliza Baxter might just be the most beautiful girl she’d ever beheld. How could her mother agree to chaperone a young lady that was considerably more beautiful than either Henrietta or herself?

“I’m so very pleased to meet you,” Eliza said, elegant in bearing but visibly nervous.

“Speak, my girls,” Frederica instructed.

Latica cleared her throat and spoke. “We’re… happy to meet you, Eliza.”

“You must be Latica.”

“Indeed.”

“Yes, wonderful to meet you. I do hope that we can be friends.”

From her affable nature, Latica sensed that Eliza was a girl that could perhaps be trusted. Yet, from the scowl on Henrietta’s face, she was under the impression that her sister did not feel the same.

“Charming,” Henrietta said flatly.

“Oh, Henrietta, I’ve heard so much about you,” Eliza went on. “Your gown… is so lovely.”

Henrietta’s response was flat again. “I thank you.”

“Please, Eliza, be seated. Take a cup of tea.” Frederica motioned for the servants to serve Eliza, and as she sat, Latica observed her. Eliza had stunning brown hair and eyes, and her figure was ever so perfect. She gazed down at her own imperfect figure and wondered how it was that Eliza Baxter accomplished such a small waste. Oh, it was so

vexing, but Latica must do her best to be kind.

Once Eliza was given her tea, the conversation faltered for some time, as Henrietta still didn't wish to speak, Latica didn't know what to say, and Eliza's nerves would not quell.

"What is your favourite thing to do in town?" Eliza asked.

Latica could finally think of something to say. "I enjoy going for strolls in the park. It's ever so lovely this time of year."

Eliza sat up in her seat with enthusiasm. "Oh, I very much love going for strolls as well. I should love to do so often."

"And how soon do you wish to be married?" Henrietta asked quickly, her brow elevated.

Eliza was made uncomfortable by this and answered slowly, "I suppose that there is no rush. But if I could find a suitable partner this season, I'd be very much pleased."

"Hmf," Henrietta uttered.

Chapter 3

Oh, Eliza feared that she'd never calm down. It was a mixture of excitement and trepidation. Never had she been a part of the *ton* before, and from the finery that the Newport sisters wore, she was sure that it was going to be difficult to fit in. Yet still, she had some very comely gowns thanks to her father's business, and she could feel proud in the lavender dress that she wore that afternoon.

"Whatever did you do in Manchester?" Lady Carthope asked.

"There were plenty of things to do, I assure you." Eliza set down her tea, which was remarkably rich in flavour. "I spent a great deal of time on my studies but also luxuriated in long walks and rides. I've become adept at riding horses."

Lady Carthope quipped, "That's a tad masculine, don't you think?"

Eliza reddened. Her father always encouraged her to engage in sport, and she saw nothing unsuitable about it. "On the contrary. I ride side-saddle, of course. But I greatly benefit from the exertion."

"I never allow my girls to ride. Oh, when I see young ladies riding in Hyde Park, I become positively aghast."

"Ladies ride in Hyde Park?" Eliza asked in wonder.

“Indeed. If you ask me, they only receive the attention of men because of their boldness. But there’s nothing decidedly feminine about the practice. Let the men have their horses and let the ladies learn how to play the piano. This is the way it has always been done.” Lady Carthope sipped her tea with a decidedly pompous air.

Was Eliza to feel like an outcast for the entirety of her time in London? She almost assumed that that would be the case. But it was important to her to find a husband. Not because she was in need of funds, but because Eliza wished to fall in love! Her mother and father had been very much in love, which gave Eliza a good model for what she hoped to find in her life.

A bit of silence followed, and Eliza was left to wonder what might happen next. Should she ask questions about the season and the first ball they would attend? There were so many things that she wanted to know, but Eliza didn’t want to come off as nosy or imposing.

“Well then,” Lady Carthope said elegantly, rising from her seat, “Let us get you situated in your room so that you might change out of your travelling clothes.”

Eliza didn’t have the heart to mention that she wasn’t wearing travelling clothes, nor did she have anything more impressive to change into for the late afternoon.

“Yes, I should like to see my room.”

“A servant shall escort you. Henrietta, Latica, why don’t you go with Eliza to help her situate herself.”

“I fear that I have plans for this afternoon,” Henrietta replied, inspecting her nails. “But if Latica is unengaged, I’m sure she’d be willing.”

Eliza turned to Latica, who was the shorter and fairer of the two sisters, albeit quiet. Latica said, “Yes, I can help Eliza to settle and show her around the house.”

“That is most welcoming of you, Latica,” Lady Carthope replied. “Good afternoon,” she added, excusing herself.

Henrietta got up silently from her chair and left the room, glaring at Eliza all the while. Eliza turned to Latica for reassurance, who smiled warmly. “Come this way,” Latica said, exiting the parlour.

As Eliza followed Latica, she was in awe of her surroundings. Everything was so luxurious and a bit ostentatious, something that Eliza was not used to in the slightest. Her father always kept their home very simple and clean, and Eliza wondered if she might prefer that kind of atmosphere.

There was something of a tour, with Latica showing Eliza the breakfast and tea rooms, the dining room, the stairs to the servants’ quarters, and all the rest. Each room seemed to be more lavish than the last, but there was an eerie silence in the home that Eliza couldn’t quite understand.

“And this is your room,” Latica said, motioning with her hand. “It’s very quaint.”

Stepping inside, Eliza considered that there was nothing quaint about it. Her room seemed just as lavish as the rest. She had her own water closet with a porcelain tub for bathing! Eliza couldn't believe her eyes.

"Have you always lived like this?"

Latica laughed. "Of course, we have. I know no other life. If you ask me, I feel that our townhome is more modest than the country estate."

"How inspiring."

"Yes, you will find yourself comfortable here. We receive guests within an hour's time, and once that is done, we make preparations for supper."

"What kinds of preparations?" Eliza asked, watching as a servant brought her trunk into the room and opened it.

"Dressing for supper, of course. Mother insists that it be quite formal. There are often guests."

"How very intimidating," Eliza replied candidly.

Latica smiled warmly yet again, giving Eliza reassurance. "Don't fear. You'll adjust rather quickly, I'm sure."

Just then, an old, diminutive woman stepped into the room wearing a starched apron.

“Is this your grandmother?” Eliza asked innocently.

“Heavens, no! This is your abigail. She’ll assist you with dressing and undressing.”

“I’m sure that’s unnecessary.”

“Of course, it’s necessary. I don’t know what I’d do without mine.”

The older woman bowed and said, “Pleased to serve you, my lady.”

Eliza put up a hand. “I’m not a lady. I’m merely a commoner.”

The abigail lifted her brow. “Very well… Miss.”

Whilst the older lady unpacked Eliza’s trunk, Latica bid them sit, and once seated, she said, “I’m so happy that you enjoy walking in the park. It’s one of my favourite pastimes.”

“That’s wonderful to hear. I do enjoy the exercise. My father always encouraged it.”

Latica gazed at her quizzically. “How very odd. My mother is not pleased with it when I walk too far.”

“And now, that seems odd to me!”

“Do you know how to dance? We’ll attend plenty of balls and dances.”

Eliza gazed down bashfully. “I know how to dance, but I very much fear that I might step on a gentleman’s foot.”

Latica laughed and brought a hand over her mouth. “I have done that in the past. I promise you that most men are very forgiving.”

All at once, Eliza felt a strong affinity towards Latica. It was ever so inviting, considering that Henrietta didn’t seem to care for her at all, and the countess was remarkably cold, although Eliza was grateful for her hospitality.

“And… your father?”

Latica reddened. “You have heard of him.”

“I have.”

“It’s a dreadful situation. My mother doesn’t talk of it often, but I know that it’s why she’s intent upon marrying me off this season. He keeps to himself much. There are some days when I only see father at supper and some days where he’s not at supper at all. He always takes breakfast and tea in his study.”

“I’m sorry.” Eliza’s tone was warm and empathetic. “I really can’t imagine.”

“It sounds as though your father is a very industrious and hard-working man. That must be rather inspiring.”

“Oh, but it is. I love to watch him work. I frequently travelled with him to France to see where the textiles are made. He’s so determined in what he does, and I wish to be the same.”

“In business?” Latica asked quizzically.

“Well, I suppose that I can’t do that, but there are some ladies that undertake it. No, I just wish to be as focused as he is on something. He made a whole life for himself from nothing, and I find him immensely inspiring.”

“As do I,” Latica said, then she abruptly got up from her seat. “May I inspect your gowns?”

Eliza nearly cringed. Was this normal amongst society ladies? “If you wish.”

Latica opened the bureau, where the abigail had already hung the gowns. She frowned to herself ever so slightly. “These are rather… charming.”

“You needn’t be kind. My father has very simple tastes, and he prefers me in these gowns.”

Latica turned to her. “And what do you prefer?”

Eliza shrugged. “I’m unsure. Oh, I do admire your lavish gowns. They’re so shiny and fine! I should like to wear one similar one of these days.”

“I’ll allow you to borrow some of mine,” Latica said in hushed tones. “But I fear that I’m far more dumpy than you.”

“You are not!” Eliza protested. “Perhaps you’re just too hard on yourself.”

Latica looked down at her figure, continuously frowning. “I’ve always wanted to have the perfect trim waste, as you do. When you borrow my gowns, we’ll have to stitch them in a bit.”

“Only a slight bit,” Eliza assured her.

The girls carried on for some time, relaxing and discussing gowns and finery. The tenor seemed to shift when Latica remarked, “You really

should find a husband as quickly as possible."

"Oh?"

"Why, yes! Being untitled, I would imagine that it's going to be considerably difficult. No man can ask for your hand without a bit of shame. Oh, but you shouldn't let this trouble you. Put your best foot forward, borrow my gowns, and learn how to behave like a lady."

Although the words were cutting, Latica spoke all of this affably. Eliza didn't blame her for saying all that she had because it was what she expected. Yet still, Latica's words filled her with a drop of shame, and Eliza was left to wonder if it was silly for her to come to London in the first place.

"I will do my best," she assured Latica. "I know that I have much to offer, and I'm searching for a man of keen intelligence who can see beyond titles and such."

Latica placed a friendly hand upon Eliza's shoulder. "You'll find it. I'm quite sure."

Just then, a footman entered carrying a letter. "This is for you, Miss Baxter."

"For me?" Eliza was in shock. Whoever could have sent her a letter? But just as soon as she saw Dinah Adair's seal, Eliza blushed with pride. "Oh, thank you!"

“Who is it from?” Latica inquired.

“My very best friend, Lady Dinah Adair. She lives in London and will also be a part of the season.”

“You’re friends with Lady Dinah? My word, but she is a social phenomenon.”

“Yes, she’s quite outspoken and social, but that’s entirely what I love about her.” Eliza gazed down at the letter in pride.

“I’ll leave you. Come downstairs in a half hour’s time for tea. You know the place.”

“Thank you for answering all of my questions, Latica, and for being so kind.”

“The pleasure is all mine.”

With that, Eliza was left alone to read Dinah’s letter, which she opened with relish.

Dearest Eliza,

I can’t believe that we’ll both be coming out this year, and I’m so happy

that you're in town. Promise me that we'll spend as much time together as possible. In fact, I think that a long stroll tomorrow morning sounds ideal. Respond at your convenience.

Yours,

Dinah

Eliza pressed the letter against her heart. How remarkable it was that her best friend was the daughter of an earl. Dinah always exhibited an open mind and kind heart, and that's why she accepted the friendship of the daughter of a tradesman.

Eliza was already anticipating the following morning because she and Dinah always had so much to talk about. But the next task at hand was to prepare herself for tea. Should she change her apparel? She thought so, considering how the countess assumed her gown to be travelling attire.

Walking to the bureau, Eliza inspected her gowns and frowned to herself. No, they were not very flashy or impressive. She would definitely need to take Latica up on her offer.

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